



A Camelot Triptych

by

Norris Lacy

To Sandra, with
thanks for reading it...
Norris
18 March '97

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I. Merlin's Tale

II. Winter's Queen

III. The Mordred Manuscript

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A Camelot Triptych

Merlin's Tale

"Sometimes you have to do the unpleasant
in order to accomplish the essential."

—Merlin

It was God's will that the young Arthur should become king. But Merlin was the instrument through which God's will would be achieved. At Christmastime, Merlin set up a large stone in front of the cathedral. Imbedded in an anvil on the stone was a great silver sword, and there was an inscription that promised the throne to the man who could draw the sword. Many tried and failed. Some say that Merlin then hid Kay's sword (or perhaps made it vanish or made Arthur, his squire, forget it) so that Arthur would be sent back to seek another one. The first sword Arthur saw was the one in the anvil. Without effort, he withdrew it. But before God's will could become reality, Merlin was needed to assist Arthur in

subduing his enemies and imposing his will. So Arthur became king, and Merlin was his companion, advisor, and friend.

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“I was there at the beginning. And soon it will all be over.” That is how Merlin began. He went on to tell Blaise that he was impatient for it to be ended: he was now old and tired, and he wanted nothing more than to finish his work and return to the forest, where his happiest days and years had been spent. “But there are still some matters to look after at court,” he said. “And especially, it is important that the events of these past years be recorded. The world needs to know what has been done, and they need to know why and how. And so I need you. You understand my ways, and you can explain Arthur for me. I want you to write about all that has happened. I want you to write my story.”

It briefly occurred to Blaise that, in a way, this was also *his* story. It could be called “The Book of Blaise.” He rather liked the sound of that, but more important, he thought it partly his because, after all, it was he who had taught Merlin. Merlin was his apprentice, and it seemed presumptuous to him for the younger man to talk of “my story” and “my ideas” and “my accomplishments,” when in fact Blaise had not only taught him the skills but had also provided knowledge and, especially, advice. Some of that advice had been crucial—Blaise had proposed that the infant Arthur be raised away from Uther—whereas much of it had been routine, though effective nevertheless: it was Blaise’s suggestion that Merlin explain his absences, when he came to consult his teacher, as a need to leave the company of men occasionally and return to the wild. That notion contributed to the impression that Merlin was, as people said with awe, “half man and half spirit.” And of course that reputation certainly made his work easier.

That is why Blaise first thought that it was at least as much his book as it was Merlin’s. But when he mentioned that in passing, his student would have none of it. Without any

apparent disrespect for Blaise, he insisted that *he* was the force behind Arthur. "You taught me everything, and I honor you for that, but now I have taken matters into my own hands, and I must accept responsibility for accomplishments and failures alike."

Then he added, "My book must leave no doubt about what I have done and who I am." Blaise found that somewhat self-important; he had always found Merlin's tendency toward pomposity irritating. Yet it was true that Merlin had been a prominent figure in the kingdom long after he, Blaise, had withdrawn from the world and had been largely forgotten by nearly everyone. So Blaise obviously saw the logic of Merlin's objection, as well as the need to record the history of Arthur's reign. And, moreover, he had no real stake in the whole thing and no desire for fame. Thus, without serious objection, he set about recording the events and ideas that his student discussed with him. After having taught Merlin all he could—both the wisdom that impressed so many people and the skills that many of them interpreted as magic—he had now become simply his scribe. Blaise recognized the irony of that reversal, but he did not object to it.

So, in the weeks to follow, Merlin came whenever the press of events at court permitted it. And he dictated, sometimes in a casual, conversational way, sometimes in a more formal style that Blaise, finding it somewhat officious, came to think of as Merlin's "declamatory voice." And Blaise wrote.

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Merlin started with background. He said that he had been appalled at the violence and chaos in the kingdom in the early days and more appalled that nothing was being done to set matters right. It was clear that someone would have to step in to bring order to society, else the world might well destroy itself. King Uther was making matters worse, not better, and Merlin was persuaded that the kingdom could not survive

another Uther, if indeed it managed to survive the first one. Something, obviously, had to be done.

Blaise asked, "But why did *you* have to do it?" Merlin looked up at him with some suspicion; often, as if to test the response he would be given, Blaise asked questions to which he already knew the answer, or seemed to. But this time, his expression gave no hint that he was baiting Merlin; perhaps he only wanted to elicit the information he needed to write down. So Merlin answered him: "Simply because there was no one else who could or would. It was not what I wanted to do, by any means. I would have preferred to live out my days as you have, in the wilderness, or at very least dividing my time between the court and the wilderness. I have never had a taste for political life, and I'm sure I must be the only one at court who doesn't harbor personal ambitions. But what must be done must be done."

When Merlin disclaimed ambition, Blaise raised an eyebrow but continued to write. To Merlin it was a very familiar gesture, and he was to see it frequently in the weeks to come. Whenever Blaise seemed to doubt something Merlin said, he lifted his head slightly and raised his eyebrow, but then returned to his work, most often without comment. That was typical: although he sometimes asked questions, he rarely offered explicit judgments. Even if he found a statement preposterous—and he occasionally did—he usually said nothing, and he almost never disputed Merlin's words. Perhaps, if this was to be Merlin's book, Blaise had decided that he should not interfere: he should simply write what he was told. Or perhaps he saw no reason to rescue the author from his small rhetorical excesses.

And as for Merlin, he rarely reacted to the unasked question indicated by the raised eyebrow. He must have understood that responding to doubts generally confirms them. But this time he did answer, a reaction that suggested to Blaise that his student had more than once puzzled over the question of his own motivation.

So Merlin said, "I know what you're thinking." (In fact, each of them usually knew what the other was thinking; they

had been master and student for such a long time, and besides, they simply knew things that most people did not.) “You’re thinking that I have ambitions but am trying to conceal them. Well, I know that most people who are seeking power deny that they are doing so: somehow it’s perfectly respectable to *have* power but dishonorable to *want* it. And I also know perfectly well—if you’re also thinking this—that a person can delude himself about almost anything. Why, Arthur’s bastard Mordred could probably persuade himself that he wants to seize the throne only for the greater good of the kingdom.

“But the difference is that, unlike Mordred, I’m not acting from self-interest. Unlike him, I have nothing to gain and a great deal to lose. I’d like nothing better than to leave them all to their little intrigues and return to the forest. My only ambition, if it can even be called that, is to keep the kingdom from sinking back into barbarity. And to think that I’m doing all this for people who don’t seem to care one way or the other! Sometimes I think I shouldn’t bother; if they want to live in an uncivilized world, why shouldn’t they do so? But it is a weakness of mine that I still would like to leave the world a bit better than I found it. And considering what Uther had done to it, that shouldn’t be difficult.”

Merlin looked up at Blaise, searching his face for some reaction to his assurances. Despite the fact that he saw none—not even a raised eyebrow—he suspected that his master was not entirely convinced of his lack of personal ambition. Blaise could be very cynical on occasion, and, as Merlin knew very well, that cynicism was directed most sharply at those who insisted too strenuously that their motives were pure. As a result, Merlin thought it prudent not to persist in his disclaimers. So, after a small hesitation, he went on.

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“I’m weary,” said Merlin. “I have spent my life protecting fools from their foolishness. First Uther and then Arthur. Not that they were anything alike, of course.” He described Uther as a huge, crude, hairy man, given to occasional bouts of

sobriety that he immediately regretted and swore never to repeat. Merlin insisted that the king had few interests beyond warring and whoring, but in those enterprises he had no peer, enjoying a well-deserved reputation for prodigious energy and a colossal lack of finesse.

Merlin speculated that Uther's brother Pendragon would have been a much better king: he was possessed of a fine intelligence and sterling character. "Once, before a battle, I had a vision that one of them would die; I couldn't see which, but I almost hoped it would be Uther. The kingdom would have been in far better hands. At least Uther had the wisdom (at my suggestion, of course) to add his brother's name to his own; those who had no use for Uther may have found it a bit easier to stomach Uther Pendragon.

"Uther himself was none too bright, and he never accomplished much beyond stirring up discontent and provoking rebellions. And he crushed those with a brutality that only caused further uprisings. And he made mostly bad laws, but since he ignored them anyway, it didn't much matter. Uther did most things badly, and he did everything to excess except practice moderation." Merlin paused briefly, either to allow Blaise to appreciate his wit or to dramatize his next words: "His one great act was something I arranged for him: he fathered King Arthur."

He went on to suggest with uncharacteristic modesty that his own work had been rather simple. Uther had wanted Ygraine, as he wanted any woman who was young—or might somehow be construed as young if viewed through the haze of potent drink. (And since that was Uther's customary perspective, few women were judged unfit to receive the honor of his royal if mercifully brief affection.) This time the honor fell to Ygraine, but she seemed oddly ungrateful, and so Merlin, as he put it with a shrug, simply "saw to it" that Uther had her.

Merlin's lack of detail about his accomplishment suggested that the task had been not only easy but perhaps distasteful as well, and Blaise, knowing the answer that was to

come, asked why he had done it. Merlin shrugged again and said, simply, "Arthur was necessary."

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Because he thought that Uther would be the worst of influences on Arthur, Merlin arranged to have the child taken away soon after his birth and cared for by foster parents. (Blaise noted that Merlin neglected to say whose idea that had been.) Uther did not know where his son had been taken, but he hardly seemed to care. Merlin commented that Uther had been interested in lying with Ygraine but not in the product of that act. He had not argued when Merlin suggested that the child be given to someone else, and he quickly returned to his principal entertainments: war, wine, and any woman to whom, as Merlin put it, a man's title is more important than his smell.

The fact that Arthur was not generally known to be Uther's son posed a dilemma that would probably have been insoluble for anyone except Merlin. ("Or Blaise," thought Blaise.) The young man had been raised by loving and moral foster parents, but they were peasants, and that meant that Arthur was as well. How could a peasant boy impose himself as king? Who would accept him or even believe him? And the additional problem was that even Arthur himself did not know he was to be king.

But Merlin indicated to Blaise that, for him, this was a minor difficulty. "It was obvious that I couldn't just bring Arthur in from the country and announce, 'Here's your new king.' That wouldn't work even if I could convince them that he was Uther's son, because most people weren't eager to be ruled by another Uther. Fortunately, most people are like simple children: although they can't understand something that is explained rationally to them, they'll always believe what they take to be supernatural."

So it was that a large stone appeared before the cathedral at Christmastime. On the stone there was an anvil; in the anvil there was a sword. Merlin had never explained to anyone how all this was done, though he commented now that it had been

an easy matter for him, as it surely would have been for Blaise. He added, "Besides, there have to be some mysteries, and if people want to believe that the source of this wonder was divine, so much the better. It's all a matter of point of view. But in any case, it was enough that hundreds of strong men failed at a test that Arthur then accomplished without effort."

Merlin explained that he had been required to train and advise Arthur continually in the years thereafter: "It's one thing to draw a sword and another to use it." Even with Arthur's divine right demonstrated at the cathedral, people were reluctant to accept him as king. Especially reluctant were those with their own ambitions or pretensions: they were many, and many of those were perfectly willing to go to war to protect their power. And since Arthur had neither experience in war nor taste for it, his need for Merlin was obvious.

"As I said, I had no desire for fame and recognition," Merlin insisted, choosing not to glance at Blaise's eyebrow. "But even if I had, I couldn't be seen directing the activities of the new king. It was important for Arthur to be seen bringing matters under control by himself. People had to credit the king with wisdom as well as power," and thus Merlin chose to remain invisible, meeting Arthur late at night to offer private instruction and advice. His purpose, he said, was to teach Arthur so well that the teacher would become expendable. (Or, thought Blaise wryly, so well that the teacher can retire and become a secretary.) Only when Arthur's authority was established, and any remaining threats were internal rather than external and political, would Merlin present himself openly at court.

Blaise asked why Merlin bothered even then to show himself at court if, by his own admission, he was no longer needed; Merlin replied that "there were always new challenges." Blaise assumed that the reference was to Arthur's challenges, but it occurred to him that Merlin too enjoyed a challenge. And that was a worrisome thought.

Unfortunately, Merlin's effort to save Arthur from Uther's influence led to something that he saw as just as bad. He said that Uther's one saving grace had been his willingness to wield power ("though his curse—or ours—was that he didn't know when to stop"). Arthur, on the other hand, seemed to be indifferent to power and, worse, had no sense of the way to use it. Put more bluntly, as Merlin often did with Blaise, Arthur had no ambition. "That would be fine for some minor noble, but Arthur was king! And in those first years, I couldn't persuade him that the failure to exercise power, fairly but conspicuously, would simply not do. These, after all, were people who were only a step removed (if at all) from the savages of Uther's time: you couldn't expect them to govern themselves without help. They *needed* a strong hand. And if Arthur was not sufficiently ambitious, someone else—any number of people—would be more than happy to seize power. No matter how often I explained that to Arthur, he seemed content to sit around with his friends (or later lie around with his wife), enjoying life while intrigues were spun all around him. So in a sense, I had to force myself to be ambitious. Because Arthur would not."

Merlin was convinced that ambition, which so many condemn as unseemly, was essential for a strong leader (that is, for a king—not for himself). Men in positions of authority, he explained, could not succeed without ambition, by which he meant an intense desire to wield power openly and relentlessly—not ruthlessly, just relentlessly—to shape and control events and people alike, until his authority was simply taken for granted. That was what could make despots so dangerous, of course, but it could also make a good man great. Merlin said that he put it to Arthur directly, and on numerous occasions: "If you are to succeed—if you are to be what you *must* be—you have to become obsessed with exercising your power. Not just *willing* to exercise it when you absolutely have to: *obsessed*. Otherwise you'll be remembered as a goodhearted man who accomplished nothing."

After a pause, Merlin went on, in a quietly reflective tone: "Some say power corrupts. I say it corrupts only the corruptible. For those of better character, or with a higher calling, power simply confers authority. Without authority, a king becomes less than a king and is then corruptible, and then power is destructive. So power is never neutral: it is only good or bad, depending on the way one responds to it. And unfortunately, Arthur never knew how." Blaise had already noted, on more than one occasion, Merlin's preoccupation with power and authority, and Merlin must have realized that his ruminations might raise additional questions about his own motives. So he added his usual disclaimer: "But it was never a matter of making Arthur into what I wanted him to be; I simply had to make him into what he needed to be, what he *had* to be. After all, he was king, and the kingdom was at stake."

But Arthur seemed not to accept Merlin's argument, at least for a long time. He simply was unconcerned with power. He thought it enough to be fair and just and good. He had, Merlin observed with an expression that indicated either disbelief or disdain, a ridiculously naive belief in the innate goodness of people—"and despite the evidence all around him!"—and seemed to think that if he just let people alone, they would instinctively do what is right. "I could see," sighed Merlin, "that my work would not be easy."

And Guinevere certainly did not make it easier: once Arthur married her, he lost interest in everything but her. As Merlin said, "When Arthur first became king, he was the exact opposite of Uther: he was indifferent to power, and he was good neither at warring nor at whoring. But I thought time and my efforts would remedy all that. And then he married, and marriage made a bad situation worse. They say love makes men noble, but I say it makes them fools. Arthur seemed to want nothing more than to spend hour after hour with Guinevere, listening to songs and feeding her little tidbits of food. And *worse*: once he actually braided the woman's hair! It embarrasses me even to say it. And he was supposed to be *king*!

“So it eventually occurred to me that, compared to that kind of thing, whoring isn’t all that improper an activity for a man—although *I* certainly never had any interest in it, of course—and especially for a king. In fact, it can even be constructive, because it keeps the senses sharp and it keeps a man young.” After a pause, he declaimed, “You can stay young in many beds or grow old quickly in your own.” Merlin liked aphorisms.

The queen, Merlin thought, was simply a bad influence on Arthur. Or more accurately, Merlin saw her influence as paradoxical: he recognized that it reinforced Arthur’s notion of justice and goodness—and he admitted, almost grudgingly, that that was not all bad—but it was clearly destructive because it further distracted the king from his duties. “He was never very interested in his most important work: he needed to impose his authority and do everything necessary to see that it was uncontested. He seemed absolutely unconcerned with that. Yet he would spend hours or days trying to right a wrong done to a peasant. There’s nothing really wrong with that, of course, but it’s not very helpful when a throne is threatened by plots.”

He appeared, curiously, to blame Guinevere at least as much as Arthur. “But such problems never seemed to concern the queen. She was generally content to do nothing and to inspire Arthur to do the same. On occasion, though, she could certainly be meddlesome!” Sometimes, when the conversation turned to war and other subjects that require thoughtful consideration by experienced men, she would interrupt to offer her views, and it was entirely clear to Merlin and all the others that she understood nothing about politics and, naturally enough, even less than nothing about war.

“She had no ideas and too many opinions, and those opinions only disrupted things. Once, I suggested to Arthur that his wife’s contributions to serious discussion were less than helpful. Although I said that in the kindest possible way, he seemed to take offense, so I had to explain that I was telling him this in her own best interest: surely he didn’t want her to be ridiculed or despised by everyone at court. He must

have spoken to her, because she soon gave up trying to lecture warriors about war. But even without her silly public pronouncements, she was doing enough mischief just by keeping Arthur from his work."

At that point Merlin had to return to court, and Blaise assumed that the subject was closed. But on his next visit, Merlin was still preoccupied with Arthur's failings and, especially, with the queen. After pleasantries and a few general comments concerning the lamentable state of affairs at court, he began: "Arthur, as I have always said, was a good man at heart." (Blaise could not recall having heard Merlin say that, but he wrote it anyway.) "The problem was simply that he was a weak king. And there is a proverb: where the shepherd is weak, there's wool in the wolf dung. Arthur was the weak shepherd, and something had to be done to salvage the kingdom. And if something was to be done, I was obviously the one who would have to do it. And that meant that I would first have to do something about the queen."

Merlin said that once he had even gone to talk to Guinevere. He thought he could reason with her and persuade her of the need to make Arthur more active, more involved and ambitious, but as soon as he said, "You and I have to work together," she took offense, and before long she was accusing him of seeking power for his own purposes. He quickly decided that his visit had been a mistake. She would be of no help; she was too suspicious and perhaps too jealous of his relationship with Arthur. Deciding to bide his time, Merlin quickly gave up the discussion and, with proper apologies, left the queen.

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Merlin had another reason for concern. Although Arthur spent all his time closed in a room with the queen—"doing what people do, I suppose," as Merlin said—Guinevere, year after year, failed to present him with a child. It was important, Merlin said, for Arthur to have a son to succeed him. "Otherwise, I'd have to start over. And what would I do: set

up another sword in another stone? I don't know how many times people would believe that one. But on the other hand," he said with more than a trace of pride, "it's hard to imagine anything that could possibly be more impressive."

After contemplating the beauty of his sword in the stone, he went on to say, "Actually, I suppose there's something similar I could have done if I'd had to. But it was possible that I might not have to do anything at all: such matters sometimes have a way of taking care of themselves, and so I decided to bide my time."

Thus, Merlin was more than patient with Guinevere—"all in good time!"—but she still failed to produce an heir. As a result, he finally decided that it would be better for Arthur to have a son with another woman than not to have one at all. And that might accomplish two goals at once, because it could also extricate the king from the queen's web. "This wouldn't be easy, of course, because Arthur was stubbornly devoted to Guinevere and had never shown any interest in other women. But I knew how pliable men are. And besides," he smiled, "I generally accomplish what I set out to do." Merlin had never been cursed with excessive modesty.

In fact, he had always been proud of his talent, and at least in Blaise's presence he enjoyed analyzing it. "You can always create a little illusion and let people think it's magic or a miracle. That's interesting enough, I suppose, but there's no challenge in it. It's more amusing to make other people want to do what you want them to do. Harder, but much more amusing. To lead people where you want them to go, there's no need to invent facts or make marvels: it's enough to alter the point of view. I had already had modest success in turning Arthur into a competent military leader by making him see how others are his enemies. True, the queen might be a greater challenge than the Saxons, but I was confident that I could solve that problem as well. Arthur might have seen Guinevere before as his strength and refuge, but once I adjusted his perspective, he'd see just how much he needed other women."

Blaise felt that he was being lectured to, and he slightly resented it, but he saw no point in responding. Merlin had

always had a tendency to do that sort of thing, even when his audience was his teacher.

Merlin went back to his narrative. He said he began to talk frequently to Arthur about the king's need for an heir, about a monarch's duty to his people and to history, about posterity. And he also talked about what are "normal" pursuits for a strong, active man, and he spoke often of a man's need to be *able* to father a child. (*He had never felt such a need, but of course he was half man and half spirit, and he did not live by the same rules or have the same desires as others.*) And he hinted broadly about questions that were beginning to be raised in the land about Arthur's inability to produce an heir. Once he suggested that even a female child would be better than nothing, because it would at least prove to the people that the king was a man.

Merlin knew enough about the men at court to know that most of them were unwittingly his allies. They loved to boast about the women they had had, making these conquests sound both enormously pleasurable and—more important—perfectly natural. And they would surely encourage and approve any temptation their king might have to claim some of those natural pleasures for himself.

Nevertheless, for a very long time Arthur seemed intractable; apparently he was simply too taken by the queen to be interested in anyone else. And if that situation would not change on its own, something more would have to be done. Merlin admitted to Blaise that he had contemplated "a little task" similar to the one he had performed to let Uther possess Ygraine. He insisted that it would have been simple enough for him to "arrange things" so that, for example, Arthur would mistake another woman for his wife and lie with her. Merlin had not already made such an arrangement only because he never liked to repeat himself. But his efforts had already taken far too much time, and he was becoming increasingly impatient.

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Then fortune seemed to smile on him: Lancelot arrived. Almost from the day he appeared at court, Lancelot was Arthur's favorite. Merlin confessed that he could not understand the king's reaction: "Lancelot never struck me as being impressive or even very likeable. But there's no accounting for taste, and my taste was obviously not shared by Arthur. And especially not by Guinevere." He said he had seen how Lancelot and Guinevere looked at each other at every opportunity. Arthur seemed almost to adopt Lancelot as his son, but Merlin insisted that the queen had an interest in the newcomer that no one would call motherly. He told Blaise that as soon as Lancelot met the queen, it was obvious, "even to someone without second sight," that theirs would not be a merely formal relationship. And Merlin's next step had suddenly become apparent.

"And that step was . . . ?" inquired Blaise, whose expression suggested that he knew perfectly well what the answer was to be. Perhaps he simply wanted to press Merlin to skip over the self-congratulatory comments.

"And that step was almost absurdly simple," said Merlin. Knowing that Arthur wanted Lancelot at court as much as possible, Merlin concocted the idea of "the queen's knight," explaining to the king that it had been the custom in Uther's time to assign a knight to look after the queen's needs and to champion her in tournaments and wars. Recounting this, Merlin smiled at the absurd thought of Uther wasting a knight that way—on a woman! Then he returned to his story: "I suggested that, since Lancelot was like a son to him, it would be natural for his 'son' to be the devoted servant of his wife. He thought that an excellent idea, as of course I knew he would.

"It was perfect: if Guinevere was interested in Lancelot, as she so obviously was, that might make her cling a little less to Arthur. And if Arthur should ever suspect the precise nature of Lancelot's devotion to the queen, it should be possible to pry him away from her. Then he might finally concentrate more on his duty. And if by chance he could be brought to look elsewhere for his pleasure, he might even find that a

queen is not the only one who can produce a future king. I know this sounds unlikely, but when it is done step by step (and of course by me) it isn't farfetched at all."

And so it was that, ever patient, Merlin continued to talk to Arthur about his missing heir. In addition, the queen had now begun hearing certain rumors about Arthur's leisure activities. (Merlin chose not to explain the source of those rumors, but Blaise observed that his student clearly enjoyed the irony of conflicting rumors, some of them questioning Arthur's manhood, others suggesting that he consorted with women other than his wife.) And the final ingredient was quickly added to the mix: Merlin said it was clear from the beginning that Lancelot and Guinevere loved each other, and thus "it was almost inevitable," he said with a smile, "that other rumors should start and that those rumors should make their way to Arthur's ears."

Merlin insisted that he was now entirely confident of success. The elements were all in place: Arthur's need for a son and heir, rumors reaching the queen about Arthur, rumors reaching the king about Guinevere and her lover, and "the essential element," Merlin's genius. Everything was set, but it was by no means easy.

About that time, Merlin began arranging situations in which Arthur, always after good food and strong drink, would find himself in the company of highly ornamental young women. Some people might have assumed, said Merlin slyly, that there was also some magic involved, perhaps in a potion; but maybe the only potion was the drink, which, as he often observed, "dulls the wit and sharpens the will."

Even so, it was a slow and frustrating process, largely because Arthur seemed disinclined to believe the worst—Merlin said "the truth"—about Lancelot and Guinevere. But Merlin was a believer in precise timing, and there came a summer evening when everything was right. On an occasion when Arthur seemed to be suffering from jealousy (or at least willing to entertain doubts), drink happened to be flowing freely, and the king found himself in the presence of a young

woman whose attractions were undeniable and whose instructions were precise.

As if wanting to avoid the unpleasant details, Merlin said simply, "It all went very well. Oh, there was the predictable remorse the next morning, so the whole process had to be repeated." Eventually, but only after a very long time, the king was led to achieve what Merlin considered "an acceptable level of womanizing." Then, as if he realized that he sounded callous or cynical, he explained that it was acceptable in that it might very well produce an heir. Then he added, "Surely a night of pleasure is an attractive enough price to pay for a kingdom." And after a pause, he went on: "The irony is that Guinevere believed that Arthur had long since been feasting on what, in reality, he only now had begun to taste."

Merlin paused to savor the irony or, perhaps, his brilliance. Then, as if reading Blaise's thoughts, he said, "I know all this sounds cruel or diabolical. I didn't enjoy it." (This time he resented the eyebrow; Blaise was altogether too suspicious of his motives.) "I really didn't. But it had to be done. Arthur had to take charge of the kingdom if it was to survive, and then he had to father a child to prevent chaos after his death. After all, it had taken years to bring any stability to this land: I couldn't just ignore the future."

He went on: "I did feel bad about Guenevere, though, at least after she gave up her occasional meddling in public affairs. She was not an evil woman, just a silly romantic one who never understood anything about royal obligations. She thought that if she and the king were happy in their little room, there was no need to worry about anything else. She was so naive that I felt genuinely sorry for her, but sometimes you have to do the unpleasant in order to accomplish the essential. And so, under the circumstances, I really couldn't put her emotional state before the survival of a kingdom, could I?" Blaise chose to take this as a rhetorical question and said nothing.

After a pause, Merlin began to reflect: "I suppose that's the difference between Arthur and me. If a duty is unpleasant, Arthur does his best to neglect it entirely and not worry about

the consequences. If it is unpleasant but necessary, I do it. And this was necessary, because civilization was literally at stake. So I did what I had to do, because Arthur never would. But I felt bad about it: I have feelings too, you know.”

Then he went on, with a curious mixture of pride and despair, to point out that the plan was in theory a work of pure genius, but that there are things even genius cannot control. “I was of course successful in what I wanted to accomplish; I generally am.” (Blaise sighed; he had managed to teach Merlin everything but humility.) “Arthur and the queen were no longer inseparable, and he finally sampled a modest array of other pleasures, from which he might gain both some spirit and an heir. I was ready to celebrate my success. Unfortunately,” he added almost bitterly, “the result of my genius and of Arthur’s adventures was not what I had intended. I expected a proud, noble heir for Arthur. Instead, I got Mordred!

“I had hoped that the child would have his father’s intelligence and his grandfather’s spirit. Instead, it was the other way around: he inherited Arthur’s weakness and Uther’s stupidity. On top of all that, he was devious and scheming. But for some reason,” and Merlin sighed, “Arthur loved him anyway.” Maybe Arthur saw in the child the legacy that had by now become important to him. Or maybe he was simply proud that he had been able to produce the son of whom Merlin had so often talked. Whatever the reason, his emotions blinded him to Mordred’s flaws, which everyone else could see plainly.

When Merlin talked of Mordred’s paternity, Blaise patiently wrote what he heard and then said quietly, “Perhaps the mother wasn’t the best choice.” Merlin cringed, and his frown indicated that he agreed and that, moreover, the subject was particularly painful for him.

In fact, Arthur had obviously taken to heart Merlin’s encouragement that he find company in other beds: he had entered at least a few without the benefit of Merlin’s recommendation. And it was clear, although elaborate efforts had been made to conceal it, that Mordred’s mother was

Arthur's own half-sister Morgause. Even Merlin, who rarely disapproved of the unconventional, was shocked, and he had to admit with embarrassment that he had failed to control the situation properly. "Now we would all pay for it. With Uther as grandfather and Morgause as mother, I suppose Mordred was inevitable." He paused and then added, with a small ironic smile, "Arthur had been necessary. Mordred was just inevitable."

But it was obvious to him that he was going to have to find a way to undo Arthur's—or was it his?—mistake.

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Even while working to free Arthur from the queen's influence, Merlin had also been planning ways to solidify Arthur's position in the minds of his subjects. In the absence of genuinely strong leadership from Arthur, he had only one choice: he had to make a myth. He explained that "you can't talk about politics or statesmanship or civic duty or anything else to these people and expect them to listen. And you certainly can't expect them to understand, at least without help, that Arthur is a great and immortal leader. So you have to use images and symbols; *that's* something people can comprehend.

"That's what we did with the big round table in Arthur's castle. That was ridiculously simple, but it was effective, and I have to confess I'm rather proud of it. It really was an imposing table, enormous and solid and heavy. But it was *only* a table until I made Arthur and others start thinking of it in symbolic terms. Point of view again. Instead of remaining a round table, it became *the* Round Table, a symbol of right and justice. We spoke of 'membership' in the Round Table Fellowship, and since that made it seem special, knights were eager to join. And one helpful fact about images is that their meaning attaches to those associated with them. So the Knights of the Round Table were respected and revered, and Arthur was naturally the greatest of them. A stroke of genius, if I might afford myself that immodest assessment."

Uncharacteristically, Blaise muttered something. Merlin thought he heard, "You very well might," but he could not be sure, and he chose not to ask.

Having confirmed his theories concerning the power of symbols, especially when dealing with simple minds, Merlin set about creating others. He refined court occasions and rituals, so that a feast or even a simple knighting was a great event; he made the king's comings and goings into memorable occurrences; he gave close attention to clothing, to gestures, to lighting. To establish Arthur as a venerable king and institution, he started using his name as an adjective, talking of "Arthurian glory," "the Arthurian era," and such. He even took an ornate gold cup from a storage room and soon managed to transform it, in the eyes of Arthur's subjects, into a kind of holy relic, the possession of which seemed to make the king into a spiritual as well as military leader.

By then, Merlin was highly visible at court, and new rumors began to circulate, this time about him. People began to talk of "Merlin's magic," attributing to him almost everything they could not understand. The term "Merlinian" was even used on occasion to describe mysterious events. Some people said that Merlin could read thoughts and predict the future. Others said he had been fathered either by an angel or, more likely, by a devil. He himself insisted that he was not responsible for any of these notions, but he never made an effort to dispel them either, pointing out that, "as a matter of principle, I refuse ever to have anything to do with rumors." Merlin had a taste for irony.

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Surprisingly, said Merlin, Arthur finally took Mordred to the castle and presented him, almost proudly, to the queen. No less surprisingly, she eventually came to accept the child, though obviously not without great difficulty and much time. Merlin theorized that she wanted so desperately to reclaim the husband who now spent more time with other women than with her that she dared not reject the son he seemed to love.

Subsequent events appeared to confirm his theory, even as it complicated his work: Guinevere's acceptance of Mordred seemed to draw her and the king closer together. And for a while Arthur actually took his parental obligations seriously. "Now they were just a happy family: the king, the queen, and their little cretin!" Something, clearly, had to be done; Merlin had to undo the damage he had done. But it was obvious that this could not be accomplished overnight.

Eventually, and at first hesitantly, Merlin started speaking against Mordred, telling Arthur as much as he dared about Mordred's lack of the qualities required of a king. After a while, he decided that he had to go farther, and one day, when he sensed that Arthur was in a receptive or at least pliant mood, he moved the conversation around to the circumstances of Mordred's conception and birth. He suggested that many of the nobles had doubts about Mordred because he was not the legitimate son of the king and queen. (Blaise considered the irony—it was Merlin, after all, who had pressed Arthur to have a child out of wedlock when it was apparent that that was the only way—but said nothing.)

Finally, Merlin said to Arthur in his gentlest voice, "But Arthur, even if he had all your fine qualities—and he doesn't—he'd still be a bastard. And a bastard must never be allowed to rule." (But wasn't that already the case? thought Blaise.) Arthur did not leap to Mordred's defense, and Merlin decided that the seed had been properly planted. Thereafter, he most often referred to Mordred in passing as "the bastard," always hoping that he was not overplaying his hand. Apparently he was not, because Arthur eventually began to consider Mordred something of an embarrassment. After a time, he even started to use the same terms in speaking of Mordred, and Merlin knew he had won when Arthur, as gently as possible, eventually informed his son that he was clearly unfit to succeed him as king.

"My work was delicate," said Merlin once, in a reflective mood. "I couldn't alienate Arthur from everyone, because a king must not be out of touch with his people. Yet I had to distance him from those he had been closest to, in order to

make him focus his attention on his duties as king.” Merlin seemed to think of his actions as a subtle balancing act that only he, perhaps, was capable of accomplishing. So he explained that he tried not to turn Arthur *entirely* against anyone, even Mordred, because it was just possible that Arthur’s son might somehow prove useful. And as if that sounded cynical even to him, Merlin went on to say, perhaps commending himself for his compassionate ways, that he had once even suggested that Arthur not be so hard on Mordred, because “he’s harmless enough now.” A less thoughtful person might have added, “and, after all, he *is* your son,” but Merlin knew not to go that far: Arthur must never again think of Mordred in those terms.

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For some time, Blaise had sensed that Merlin was puzzling over a problem. Suspecting what it was and knowing that his student would eventually talk about it, he asked no questions. And he was right. One day, without preamble, Merlin launched into an evaluation of the kingdom’s prospects after Arthur (or, as he put it, “in the post-Arthurian era”) Specifically the question was, who would reign? He was briefly tempted to conclude that that was not his problem; he had done his part. What more could be expected of him? But it was quickly obvious to him that if the matter was not already settled before the king’s death, the result would be the same kind of chaos and strife that had preceded Arthur. And that would mean that everything Merlin had done would be in vain. But the difficulty was that there was no obvious candidate.

At least *to Merlin* there was no obvious candidate. What troubled him most, he said, was the possibility that Arthur very definitely had someone in mind. He said he had been horrified when, one day, Arthur had commented that “Lancelot has all the qualities we look for in a king. Don’t you think, Merlin?”

"Unbelievable," Merlin muttered, when he recounted this conversation to Blaise. He explained that, since Arthur and, by now, everyone else agreed that Mordred was worthless, the nobles would have to choose a new ruler after the king's death. Arthur's notion, apparently, was to begin immediately to prepare the way for Lancelot's accession to power. "Strange," said Merlin; "it's the only time Arthur has ever decided on his own to do *anything*. I suppose I should be pleased that he finally had some initiative, but unfortunately, he made the worst possible decision. And if Lancelot ever took power, I can imagine the fondness with which people would remember Uther Pendragon!"

And Blaise had a question: "But you managed to disqualify Mordred, and you obviously don't want the queen to rule if she survives Arthur. And you don't want to leave it to chance. So what other choice is there?"

Unsure whether Blaise was baiting him or actually endorsing Lancelot, Merlin seemed momentarily flustered. Then he responded, "Almost any other choice would be preferable. It would even be better to start again from the beginning. Lancelot's flaws of character are as obvious to everyone as his dalliance with the queen. Everyone except Arthur, that is; he's blind to both."

He continued: "Lancelot is an ambitious man who is interested only in himself: his reputation and his position at court. That's why, as soon as he came here, he worked as hard to insinuate himself into Arthur's confidence as he did into Guinevere's bed. In fact, I've sometimes wondered if he became involved with Guinevere only to be closer to the center of power: he certainly seduced *Arthur* in much the same way. In any event, he's dangerous because his ambition is just to be famous and powerful, but not to use power to accomplish something of value. Of course, he's dangerous only as long as Arthur is around. Everyone else sees through him and knows what he is, and I can't imagine the nobles would choose him. But even so, that's a risk we can't run."

Blaise thought to himself that the next step was now at hand. First Guinevere. Then Mordred. Now Lancelot. He said

nothing, but Merlin must have known or suspected what he was thinking, and he said, "I'd prefer to have nothing to do with this. Why is it left to me, anyway? Why should I spend all my time trying to protect Arthur and do what *he* ought to be doing to prepare for the future?" Then he paused dramatically and went on: "But since my work is almost over now, I suppose I'll continue." Somehow Blaise had known he would.

If Merlin wanted to rid himself of Lancelot, it was obvious that it would have to be done by convincing Arthur once and for all that his favorite knight was betraying him with the queen. No other way would work, because, as Merlin said, Arthur would not, for the present, tolerate any direct criticism of Lancelot. So the king himself would have to turn against Lancelot and the queen.

That was not a simple matter. But Merlin had often noted that those who have a certain vice are generally willing to believe that others share it. So the fact that Arthur had expanded the menu of his own carnal delights made Merlin's work easier than it would otherwise have been. Merlin still had to find the best method and the proper approach, but he insisted that that was the most obvious part. It took no time at all for him to settle on Agravain.

As soon as Merlin mentioned Arthur's nephew, Blaise understood what was in store. Agravain was nothing if not reliable: he could be trusted to think the worst of everyone and to be miserable if anyone else was happy. And of course, since Lancelot now seemed happier than anyone else, Agravain hated him most.

This time Blaise spoke up: "So you're going to let Agravain do your work for you."

"And why not?" was Merlin's prickly reply. (Blaise's words sounded like a challenge, and his student never enjoyed having his decisions or his methods questioned.) "As I've said before, one does what one must do. Actually, I'm surprised that Agravain hasn't already done something, considering what he thinks of Lancelot. But of course he's a coward: he wants to destroy Lancelot but is afraid of Arthur. Well, it will

take only the smallest nudge by me, and he'll find the nerve to denounce the happy lovers. Even though Arthur has heard the rumors more than once, he has never entirely believed them, and maybe he won't believe Agravain now. But there'll be a germ of doubt, and if Agravain can provide proof (or if Arthur just opens his eyes!), he'll soon know what the queen's knight has been doing to the queen. And then the king's laws will take care of the rest."

Then he added, "I'll be back when it's done. It won't be long."

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And it was not long, but even before he returned, Blaise had already heard what had happened at court. Lancelot, betrayed by Agravain, had fled, and the queen was a prisoner of her own husband. She was to be tried for adultery (and for treason, but of course that is the same thing when your husband is the king).

Blaise, knowing his student's skill and determination, was not surprised at what had happened. But curiously, Merlin did not seem to be particularly proud of his accomplishment, and because he was rarely reluctant to acknowledge his successes—"Humility is for those whose accomplishments are humble," he often said—Blaise did appear mildly surprised that no boasts were forthcoming. He waited. Then, with a pained expression on his face, Merlin said, "It's a sad day. I was ready to launch Arthur on his greatest successes, and, for the first time in his life, he actually seemed to be ready. It would have been glorious!" Blaise started to ask what those successes were to be, but Merlin brushed off the question: "It no longer matters." After a pause, he went on: "And now this! I did what had to be done; there was no other way. But it hasn't worked as I planned."

And as he talked on, the reasons for Merlin's strangely somber mood became clear. He said that he had begun to understand what the final outcome of present events would be.

Blaise had a presentiment about that as well, but he decided to let Merlin put it in his own words.

"Lancelot is finished; he'll never be able to come back here. But tragically, Arthur too is finished, and all we can do now is watch the game play itself out. Arthur won't survive this. I suppose I should have looked for another way. The problem is," he sighed, "that I was too kind to Mordred. I turned him and his father against each other, but I left him free to act. Now he's raising an army, and he's up to no good. If he can't be king, he'll destroy the one who is. Obviously, I should have dealt more severely with him, so he wouldn't be around now to tear everything down. It would have been easy enough to do, but I let myself be influenced by my feelings; that's something I can never afford to do. So in a strange way I suppose this is all my own fault."

"Then why not do something about it now?" asked Blaise, knowing perfectly well what the answer would be.

"Because it's just too late. Events are already in motion, and the Arthurian reign will soon be over. Arthur will be gone, and with so much left undone! And what is next? Certainly Guinevere won't do, Lancelot is removed, and Mordred is of course out of the question. Someone will have to step in for now, and then I'll have to start over at the beginning. Some things will obviously have to be done differently. It can be done, of course, and I won't make mistakes next time. But, at least for now, that means that I won't be able to leave the court, as I had wanted to do, and live out my years in peace." He sounded wistful.

He turned and looked at the forest, and with his back to Blaise, he said softly, "Arthur has never been what he should have been, of course, but at heart he's a good man, and all in all he's been a reasonably good king. But that has taken all my effort and energy and skill. And then I made one miscalculation, and it's come back to haunt me. I've spent my entire life saving fools from themselves, but in the end I couldn't save Arthur from Mordred—or from himself. Especially from himself."

And then, after a brief pause and a sigh, he turned back to face his master and scribe, and he said, now in a firmer voice, "I suppose I'd better get started: the world won't wait."

Winter's Queen

"In a world filled with sorrow, mortality is mercy."

—*Guinevere*

At the castle of King Leodagan, Arthur met the king's daughter, Guinevere. Taken by her youth, her extraordinary beauty and intelligence, and an innocence he had seen in few women, he soon loved her and asked Leodagan for her in marriage. Thus did King Arthur find his queen. They returned to Camelot, where their marriage was celebrated with prayers, ceremony, and great feasting. And Leodagan gave Arthur a gift of a great Round Table, and the best knights from all the world came to join the Fellowship and to pledge their loyalty to the king. And Arthur and his queen ruled with wisdom and compassion for many years and were loved and respected as no others could have been.

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She had been here for some months before we even suspected who she was. She just appeared one day, and it was quickly obvious that she did not belong to the order. That itself was not strange: it has always been common for women, especially widows, to retire to the convent and live out their days in prayer and solitude. So we were hardly even curious about her—until a knight arrived to speak with her.

One of the younger sisters who had been here only a short time excitedly whispered to us the news that the knight was Lancelot. She said she was sure, because he had once spent a week at her father's castle, recovering from a wound he had received in a tournament. And if he really *was* Lancelot, she must be Guinevere! (And that must mean that what people said about them was true.) Now we *were* curious!

We had heard the terrible rumors. King Arthur was dead, killed (it was said) by the cowardly son he had fathered in sin. The rumors about the queen were less precise. We heard that she had disappeared, but it was not clear whether she had gone away with Lancelot or had taken refuge in a convent. We chose to believe the latter, perhaps simply because we wanted it to be true.

After all, she had come here at about the right time. She was mysterious and, we thought, regal. And although she was no longer young, she was still remarkably beautiful (though her eyes were very sad, it seemed to me). She mostly kept to herself, and for a long time we were intimidated by her, especially after we decided that she was the queen. But gradually some of the sisters came to know her well enough to carry on brief conversations, and eventually we learned that we were right about her identity: this was Guinevere!

As I became acquainted with her, I always found her pleasant and kind, but I noticed that she never talked about matters of any consequence. In particular, she almost never spoke about the past, even when the sisters asked her direct questions about Arthur or Merlin or some of the events she had lived through. For a long time she simply refused, politely but firmly, saying that that was precisely what she had come here to

forget: "At my age, one is expected to look back, I suppose, but I have no interest in the past." That was the only reason she ever gave, but I thought it was enough, and I thought we should respect her wishes.

But gradually she began to answer some of those questions, with a few words at first and eventually in more detail. Then, surprisingly, during her second winter here, she actually decided to have some of her thoughts and experiences written down. It must have had something to do with age or winter or the end of the year; in any event, it was obvious that, despite her wishes, her past would just not go away.

She insisted that she was doing this only for herself and that what she might have to say would be of little interest and no importance to anyone else. Moreover, she set two conditions. First, she would not attempt to dictate a history of Arthur's reign, saying that she was not the one to do that. Second, she insisted that nothing she might say should be shared with the world during her lifetime.

And then I was asked to write what she dictated. That duty fell to me merely because I was one of the few sisters who had been taught to write. My task was interesting but also troubling: the queen was known for her beauty, her nobility, and her generosity but also (assuming the rumors were true) for her sin, and I knew I shouldn't be fascinated by a sinner. But, even so, it was impossible to sit with her and not be overwhelmed by her and by her role in great events that had changed our whole world.

So I was chosen, and over the next two weeks she spoke, sometimes for just a few minutes a day and sometimes longer, about her past, about her hopes, and about her regrets. At first she was self-conscious and formal, but before long she seemed almost to forget about me, and I had the impression that she was really talking to herself. Sometimes I actually wondered if she even realized I was there: she usually appeared to be lost in her thoughts, and she most often spoke in a soft monotone voice while gazing into the fire or at the snow outside our window.

I came to think of our meetings as conversations, but they were not. I actually spoke little, only asking an occasional

question when one of her frequent pauses went on and on. I was curious about many things, but I felt timid about questioning her or making comments: I thought it would be presumptuous of me to do so, and it seemed to be an intrusion into something private. Even the little I did say is not included here, because it is of no importance: this is her story, and these must be her own words.

I must also confess that she said many things that I would have preferred not to hear. It was troubling to me that, although she often spoke of her regrets, she rarely expressed remorse or guilt for anything. Especially, I was uncomfortable listening to her talk of intimate or shameful matters, mostly concerning Lancelot. I was even tempted to omit her words when she first said she loved him.

But I did not. I had been asked to write whatever she had to say, and I decided I had no right to leave anything out. So, in spite of my embarrassment, I have done my duty as accurately and faithfully as I could. And here is the queen's story, as she told it to me.

* * *

It seems so long ago that I was happy (said the queen), and I know I never can be again. The most I can hope now is that I will soon be at peace, even though it will not be in this world. So, as I force myself to think back on my life, I am also looking toward the future and waiting for death to bring an end to my pain.

I don't really regret that I am no longer queen, but the circumstances of my fall are still painful. Rumors about my love for Lancelot and about a political alliance between Mordred and me against Arthur were enough to make the king reject me. It is true that I loved—that I love!—Lancelot, but suspicions that I would ever betray the king are wrong, and to me they are cruel and unbearable. Mordred may have been a traitor, but I am not!

But right or wrong, the rumors were believed by many. Arthur's nephews especially, and Agravain above all, seemed not only tempted but actually eager to believe anything negative that might be said about me. And they appeared to take my

denials as further evidence of my guilt. Eventually, and tragically, Agravain succeeded in his plots against Lancelot and me.

So I have gone from castle to convent, and now my only refuge is a nun's habit.

How life has changed! I sleep on a simple cot rather than mounds of feathers. Hard bread and a few boiled vegetables have replaced the wonderful feasts that used to last for days. I have water in place of wine, and I wear coarse gray cloth instead of gold, red, and blue silk. A dirty stone wall is my view, and as time passes it is more and more difficult to recreate in my mind the lovely, warm tapestries that used to hang in our castles.

Although there is no comfort here, I am not lamenting my present life, sad as it is: it was I who chose it. What causes me pain is not my present life but the reasons for it: I can't help resenting the injustices and jealousies that turned Arthur against me and brought me to this. And what I regret most is Arthur's refusal to support and protect me when I most needed him. He had the power to help, and I expected him to have the will. But when accusations were made against me, he stood by, unwilling to intervene. And when I was accused of the most terrible crimes, he would say only, "My laws forbid me to silence them. They have the right to speak their mind, and if they accuse you of wronging me, I have to listen." I responded, "But must you also believe them?" He never admitted that he believed them. But he never denied it either.

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The winters are harder when you're old. They seem endless. But still, most people, when they reach a certain age, hesitate to wish the winter finished, because every season, indeed every day, may be their last. I'm more fortunate than they, despite everything that has happened: for me, the end is something not to fear but to embrace. In a sense, I died when I left court, and now I simply wait and think and remember.

There are many who would surely assume that I am choosing my words carefully in order to redeem my reputation.

That is untrue, but I learned long ago that there is often no relation between belief and truth. In any case, there would be no point in lying, especially now. There is no remedy for my reputation: I am condemned by many—perhaps now by everyone but Lancelot—as a shameless woman of easy virtue, who heartlessly betrayed her husband with his best friend. Nothing can change their minds during my lifetime, and after my death it really cannot matter what people think. That is not a thought I once would have had. Years ago, I was as concerned as Arthur about what he called our “posterity,” and although that is not the word I would have used, I did care about the way the world might be different because we had lived. But now, that all seems so far away and so trivial.

So I am telling the truth, as best I remember it. But I myself wonder sometimes why I decided now to talk about the past. If I’m really trying to examine my own feelings and put my thoughts and affairs in order, do I need to have them written down? Doesn’t that suggest that they are intended for someone else, that I’m trying to convince someone else? When I wonder about that, I think it might be best to stop now. But somehow, perhaps because my life will soon be ending, I simply feel the *need* to say these things.

And the fact that I am doing this only for myself comforts me and also makes it possible for me to speak about what is most important and omit the rest. It also frees me to let my thoughts go where they will.

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And of course my thoughts go relentlessly back to Lancelot. But if I force them, they go back farther, to the Arthur I knew before Lancelot, to the Arthur I loved and married. And that is where I should start—not with my second love but with my first.

One of the clearest images of my life was my first meeting with Arthur. I had heard about him; people said he was tall and strong and regal, and I suppose he was, but that’s not what I noticed. What I saw instead was the surprising gentleness in his

eyes when he looked into mine. I noticed his smile. I noticed his voice, firm but not loud, not insistent. I noticed his hands when he took mine. At a time when most men were loud and crude and demanding, Arthur seemed quiet and kind.

And I remember the day I learned that I was to be his queen. Although the marriage was naturally an arrangement between Arthur and my father, I was actually asked if I would consent! Arthur, I decided then, was not like any other man.

Before our marriage, we often talked about what our life together was to be. And Arthur talked again and again about his hopes and dreams. He said that his only desire was to give peace and happiness to his people. Although he had of course been forced into wars in order to bring peace to his lands, he had never had a taste for battle. He told me that he wanted nothing more than to rule benevolently in a place where justice prevailed and peace was practiced. A place where jousting was fine sport rather than training for war. A place where songs would replace battle cries and love would replace war. A place, he liked to say, of peace and beauty. A good life, a gentle life, he said.

And he said he wanted me beside him. As his partner, his love, his entire life.

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And everything he promised was true for a while, and we were happy. There were just a few clouds. I soon learned that Arthur sometimes suffered from lingering dark moods and occasionally even had violent outbursts of anger, but rarely at me and nothing like the rages of many men. I found those periods difficult, but I tried not to let them hurt: although I was young and romantic, I had never expected perfection, even from Arthur. So I just did my best to help him through those times, comforting myself with the thought that this was a good man who loved me and needed me.

During those first days, we had peace, and every day was a celebration. We had great feasts in fine castles; we had the best musicians and artists; we had beauty all around us. But what I admired most about Arthur was not that he richly entertained his

nobles and their ladies. Most kings did that, and most of the nobles could have done the same from their own wealth. What I admired was something no other king did. Of all the pleasures Arthur took in life, he said the greatest came to him from people whose lives were unlike ours: the simple people, the poor, the ill. In those first years, Arthur often set aside a day when anyone could come to court to seek justice or charity. We talked with those who came, asking about their lives and families, and when we learned of a sick or hungry child or an ailing parent or a victim of injustice, we offered our help. I'm sure no other king could be as generous and caring as Arthur was at that time.

But that glorious time didn't last. I suppose it couldn't. Gradually, peace gave way to rumors of war and then to war itself. Perhaps wars were inevitable, especially in those times. Arthur said he desperately wanted to avoid wars but that some could be avoided only if he permitted his enemies to destroy everything he was trying to build. So there came a day when he had to leave me to go to war. His absence was pure pain for me, but I understood. It was of course my duty, as queen, to understand.

That first war was mercifully brief. But, sadly, it was soon followed by another and then another, and it was not always easy to understand why they were necessary. At court, I sometimes asked about the causes of a war or commented on the results of one, but I never got a proper answer. In fact, I quickly noticed that whenever I raised *any* serious subject, I was mostly ignored. I know very well that my questions and comments were just as sensible as anything others had to say, but nevertheless, the men I asked would look uncomfortable, mutter some nonsensical answer (or say nothing at all), and soon turn to talk among themselves. Of course, there was no mystery about the reasons for these reactions: it's not considered proper for women to have serious thoughts about serious subjects, much less talk publicly about those thoughts.

It was rare for anyone to put it that way, of course. Such notions usually remained unexpressed, but when they were discussed, the men most often presented them as a favor being done for women. They said that a woman should not be

bothered with such matters. War and affairs of state were a terrible burden that men, of course, had to shoulder—that was their duty and their domain, and “after all, these are warlike times”—but women had other, equally important, functions and could mercifully be spared this unpleasantness. So I was consulted about feasts and court occasions and such, but not about political and military matters, even though they concerned me as much as anyone else.

I suppose I shouldn’t have been surprised. Maybe I should have been surprised instead if the men at court *had* listened to a woman; that just wasn’t done. But, perhaps naively, I had expected that I would be taken seriously, if not because I had something of interest to say, then at least because I was queen. Furthermore, my father had always encouraged me, even when I was a child, to speak my mind, and when I did, he always listened, and because he listened, so did the other men around him. But to most of the people at Arthur’s court, apparently, I could never be anything except “just a woman.” At least I was fortunate, I told myself, that Arthur was not like the others. I was consoled by that thought. For a while.

There may also be another reason why my ideas were not welcome at court: not only was it thought inappropriate for a woman to have serious thoughts, but my opinions about war in particular were obviously not popular. I once remarked in the presence of a number of Arthur’s knights and friends that I simply couldn’t understand going to war, because most wars didn’t seem to change anything. It was true. Most of the wars, at least by then, were against nobles and knights who had been Arthur’s allies but who, through ambition or jealousy, had turned against him. Then, when Arthur defeated them, as he always did, they would quickly swear fealty to him—because he made them do it—and soon be his most faithful allies once again.

So politics and warfare moved in a circle, and I made the error of saying so, adding that the only thing that was different was that many people were dead. There was a strange silence, and most of them, this time *including Arthur*, stared awkwardly at their plates or out the window until someone finally, and just as awkwardly, changed the subject. Once again I was obviously

being “just a woman,” but this was different and painful: now I was a woman who was apparently an embarrassment even to her husband and king, and he said nothing in my defense. If I thought my ideas were perfectly obvious—and I still do—the others took them as further proof that serious discussions should be reserved for men. But I was less angry at all the rest of them, since I expected their response, than I was confused by Arthur’s silence. That was not like him, I thought.

But that isn’t entirely true, either. I suppose I realized, even at that time, that Arthur was changing. As I talk about him, my words may make the change seem abrupt, but it was not; it occurred over a period of some years, and I only gradually became aware of it. Maybe I just didn’t want to admit what was happening. Only when something would shock or surprise me would I realize that, a month or a year earlier, the Arthur I had married would not have said or done such a thing. I’m not even quite sure *when* he began to change, but it is clear that he did.

And my statement about war changing nothing had been not quite correct. There was one other way that the end of a war was different from its beginning: as time went on and battles multiplied, Arthur’s reputation—not for generosity but for the art of war—was invariably enhanced. And what worried me most was that, despite what Arthur said, I began to suspect that he actually enjoyed the fighting more than he would admit. On the occasions when we discussed it, he continued to tell me that he abhorred war and wanted only peace, but I noticed that he rarely said such things in the presence of his knights. (It was apparently considered unnatural for a man not to love war, and most of the knights seemed to think that they regularly had to prove themselves by fighting, or at least by talking incessantly about the pleasures and excitement of war.)

Worse, when Arthur was discussing recent battles, he would often speak with obvious pride of his accomplishments with arms. Once I heard a knight ask him how many people he had killed in the last battle, and not only did Arthur know the answer, but he responded in what I thought was a boastful tone. I found that frightening. Of course, I understood—everyone understands—that if you have to go to war, you have to kill

people or be killed. But the killing ought to be a cause for sadness, not for celebration. And the boasts sounded strangely out of character for Arthur, or at least for the Arthur I had married and known. How could the man who had been gentle and loving with me take pleasure in anyone's violent death?

Eventually—and this was much later—I tried to discuss these questions with him, but instead of trying to understand, as he once would have done, he suggested that I should listen rather than talk in the presence of his knights. He told me that he realized that women didn't understand such things, because they were not brought up to deal with them. That, he said, was why affairs of state naturally had to be decided by men. His tone was not abrupt or cruel, of course; he rarely was that. But when he talked to me, I almost had the impression that he was trying to explain something complicated to a child. It was not like Arthur, and I wondered where he had got these ideas. Only later did I learn their origin.

His words wounded me, and surely he must have seen that. But when he tried to console me, he made matters worse, not better, by assuring me that I had an important role to play in the kingdom, simply by being at his side and supporting him and—he actually said this!—by “just being lovely.” I was speechless! Arthur had often complimented my beauty, and that pleased me, but I had never suspected that he thought that was all that mattered. And now he was telling me that being lovely was the most important thing a woman could do!

For the very first time, I felt a great distance open between us. And when I tried to tell him that, he replied, still gently but with obvious frustration in his voice, “But you have everything my wealth and position can give you. You have servants all around you and all the money you could possibly want, and you even have a throne. Why can't you be happy with that?” Once more, I was surprised that Arthur would say such a thing; there was a time when I'm sure he would not even have thought of talking to me that way. He had loved me, and he had considered me his partner and his friend. No longer. How could he have changed so much? I wanted to ask, but instead, I let the subject drop.

Eventually I would become aware of other changes in Arthur. Again, I'm not sure when they began, but it must have been long before. The long talks we had once had became less frequent and finally rare. That itself was not the problem, because talking wasn't really necessary: I had always treasured the intimacy I felt between us whether we talked or just sat together in silence. But this was a different kind of silence, a cold one that would now divide us instead of making us one. The intimacy was disappearing, and after a while Arthur became almost a stranger. I really think I would have preferred his anger to the cruel silences: the one thing I could not bear was his *indifference*.

About the same time, I noticed that the respect that most of the people had always had for Arthur was now turning into something closer to reverence. They talked often about what a great king he was, and about the way he was becoming stronger and more commanding every day. It is true that he was a good king: I have never had any doubt about that. But I was also painfully aware that, at the same time that his prestige was increasing rapidly, our marriage—and our love—were suffering. They were no longer what they had once been.

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Long before matters reached that point, Arthur had begun spending more and more time in the company of knights, without women present. He called his group of friends the Round Table Fellowship. I confess that I always thought the Round Table was rather silly. It seemed to be mostly a kind of men's social club. The knights gathered there regularly with Arthur to drink and to boast about their most recent military conquests (and also their amorous ones, I learned later). Mostly idle talk among men, and harmless enough, I thought. I never said these things to Arthur, of course, both because the meetings seemed important to him and because it was after all my father who had given him the table as a wedding gift.

It was only later, I believe, that Merlin and Arthur started talking about the Round Table as a kind of moral concept rather

than a social gathering. They said it stood for justice and right and truth and that all its members were carefully selected and were sworn to uphold its ideals. I wonder if they just invented that idea one day; it always seemed to me that the “members” were just Arthur’s same old friends, joined by any new arrivals who seemed to be congenial and pleasant company. But, as I said, I saw no harm in it, and in fact, if people believed what they (and Merlin especially) said about it, there was probably good in it. It could reassure them about the basic good that I still desperately wanted to find in Arthur. So I kept silent.

Soon he began being away more and more, and it was not always because of a war (though there were many of those, too). I was troubled by his absences. Usually, though not always, he told me when he would be away, and he said he would be feasting or hunting with his friends. It saddened me that he sometimes preferred their company to mine, but I tried to put it out of my mind, telling myself that it was silly to be jealous of his friends. On the other hand, when he was with me, he often seemed more solicitous than ever—that was before the silences separated us—bringing me gifts, asking about my friends and my moods and my daily activities, and telling me he loved me. The most private pleasures of married life were now rare, of course, but that is natural as the years go on.

Or so I thought. Sometimes I’m astonished at how naive I could be when I was young.

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It is surprising how much you can hear in a castle. I don’t mean just that there is a great deal of gossip, although that is certainly true as well, but that it really is possible to hear much of what is said above a whisper. There are some rooms in which even the smallest sound seems to echo off the opposite wall. I was not particularly interested in gossip, but sometimes I overheard things in spite of myself.

Much of what I would overhear was idle gossip and speculation, sometimes right and sometimes wrong: Arthur might be leaving, or someone else was expected to arrive; a

certain knight and a certain lady were engaging in improper conduct. The last seemed harmless enough to me, and even mildly entertaining, until “a certain knight” was replaced by “a certain king.” And so it was that, as I sat quietly one day, I heard the rumors about Arthur’s absences. He was apparently still seeking his private pleasures—but not with his queen.

At first I dismissed this as simple (though not entirely harmless) gossip. If Arthur had to be away, it was natural that some people, with much time and little enough to do, would invent stories. And even when the rumors began to sound malicious, I still dismissed them: it is natural that a man so beloved by many should be resented by a few. So I tried not to worry or speculate, but I couldn’t avoid thinking about it. I would decide that Arthur surely wouldn’t show me so much attention if he also loved another woman, but then I would think that perhaps he would do *just* that. (Naively, I first thought only in terms of love; only later did it occur to me that he might lie with another woman without loving her.) And surely he could *not* love anyone else: we, after all, were partners, lovers, and friends, and I had never denied him anything.

Except, it turns out, a son.

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Whether because of the wars or the natural progression of the years (or, as I later came to believe, at Merlin’s urging), Arthur seemed more and more preoccupied with what he called his posterity or his “future,” by which he meant what he would leave behind after his death. That surprised me at first, because we had long ago planned just what our legacy would be: peace, prosperity, tranquillity. A generous and gentle life was the finest legacy. We had agreed about that, but it was apparently no longer enough for him. He also wanted a son. And his need became more intense as the years passed.

He told me, “Can’t you see that a man *needs* a son? First of all, he needs to know he can *have* a son, of course, but that’s not all: he needs one to carry on what he has started. Otherwise, everything I’ve done will die with me. And I’m no longer

young.” He was forty at the time, and he was becoming obsessed with the approach of old age.

When there could no longer be serious doubt that Arthur was finding his pleasure in the beds of other women—there was eventually too much evidence—I actually wondered first what was wrong with *me*. Was it my fault? How had I failed him? Was he dissatisfied simply because we had not had a son? Was I less than a good wife? It made me angry, and still does, that I even asked these questions: I knew perfectly well that I had done nothing to merit blame. I had been a good and loving wife, and I had supported him unfailingly. It also occurred to me that, if Arthur and I did not have a child, that could be his fault as much as mine. Nevertheless, for some time I continued to wonder if I was somehow to blame for his straying. I had always thought that a man would seek the company of other women only if his own marriage was unhappy: could I have done more to make it happy?

There came a time, much later, when I finally began to wonder if, all along, Arthur might not have been more like other men than I had first seen. I’d often heard it said (by scornful women and even by boastful men) that men have only three interests—war, wine, and women. But I had never believed that of Arthur. I was sure he had been different: gentle and compassionate, a lover of peace and of his queen. But I found myself asking if he ever really *was* so much different from other men (even at the beginning) or if I had been just a silly young girl—after all, I was only fifteen when I met Arthur—and perhaps so overwhelmed by the idea of becoming queen that I couldn’t see what he was. But I quickly rejected my doubts, and even after what he became, I can’t really believe that he ever was just like the others. He *must* have been different. I desperately wanted to believe that he was different. I still do.

But I’ve often been troubled by another thought as well. Mind can betray memory, and I’ve often observed that people can tell themselves a lie—something they *wish* were true—so often that they finally believe it. And since that can happen to other people, could it happen to me? Could it be that it was *I*, not Arthur, who changed? Could it be that I fell in love with

Lancelot and then, to justify that love to myself, created in my mind an Arthur who was no longer the gentle and loving man I first knew? Could it be that Arthur *was* still that man and that I actually had betrayed a good man and a great king? That's a foolish question, because in my heart I know the answer. I know what Arthur had once been and what he had become. But that didn't keep me from wondering and sometimes blaming myself for what were his failings.

It isn't fair to give the impression that he abandoned or mistreated me. He never did that, except at the end. He did of course have occasional outbursts of anger—usually when I wanted my opinion heard on some matter that he thought was better left to the judgment of men, and especially when I eventually told him I knew he had been with other women—but otherwise he always treated me with respect. But, sadly, what I had most loved in him at first was gone.

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And then, one Sunday during a feast, a knight arrived to say that he had traveled far to become part of the Round Table Fellowship, whose fame had spread throughout the world. By that time, such arrivals were a common thing, but this one was different. This was Lancelot.

The Round Table, which I had thought silly, had brought Lancelot to me.

I now think that what first drew me to Lancelot was that he had all the qualities that Arthur had once had and now seemed to be losing. He was strong, but he was also gentle and caring and forgiving and understanding. And he seemed always to be more concerned for my happiness than for his. I think I sensed these things the first time I met Lancelot, but for a long time I didn't trust my reactions. If it is possible that I had been wrong about Arthur (I thought), couldn't I be equally wrong about Lancelot? But I wasn't: eventually I learned that he truly was all these things and more. And unlike the king, Lancelot never changed.

Arthur had instituted the custom of the “queen’s knight,” a knight chosen to offer particular service to the queen. In battle or in tournaments, that knight would of course be serving the king, but it would be done in the name of the queen, whose token he always wore on his helmet or on his lance. When there was not war, that knight was expected to serve the queen and provide for all her needs. And Arthur asked Lancelot to be my knight! Lancelot seemed slightly embarrassed, and I still don’t know whether it was because men found it awkward to be known as a “woman’s knight” or whether he already sensed, as I did, that ours would be more than an official relationship. Embarrassed or not, he accepted, both because he really had no choice and because, especially, he wanted to.

Arthur explained to me that he had seen something unusual and special in Lancelot that he had seen in no other knight. (I thought to myself, “So have I,” but I thought it best not to say so.) Lancelot, in Arthur’s judgment, was destined to be the best of the knights, not only without peer in battle but gifted in moral and social qualities. Arthur thought Lancelot was the best at riding and jousting, but he also seemed to appreciate him for his wit and his culture. It briefly occurred to me that he might be envying in Lancelot what was lacking in himself. But that was unfair to Arthur.

In any event, Lancelot quickly became Arthur’s favorite and was always in his presence when he was not in mine. I once overheard Arthur tell him that he, Lancelot, was “like a son to me,” and he often called him “my son.” That might have been nothing more than an affectionate way of addressing him, and it could also have something to do with their age difference. (Lancelot was about my age, and Arthur was twelve years older than I.) But I soon came to realize too that the Round Table had brought to the king a young man he could take as the son I had failed to give him.

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How ironic it is that soon after that, Arthur really did, at long last, have the son he wanted so much. And how painfully ironic that I was not the mother.

Mordred was a complete surprise to me. By that time, I knew about Arthur's women. Not in detail, of course: I had decided I didn't want to know too much. But I knew there were women. What I never knew was that there had been a son—until the day, much later, when Arthur brought him to the castle.

Mordred was almost three then, a very small child with very dark eyes and a timid fear of strangers. Arthur at first just said to me, "It's time you met my son." I thought he was making a small joke, and I smiled, but when he simply stood there, without a smile, waiting for me to respond, I realized that he was serious! I was stunned, and I still am astonished when I think of it. How could Arthur do that? And without warning! It's one thing to spend nights in the beds of other women but another matter entirely to parade the results of your sins before your wife. And here he was, without embarrassment, presenting his child to the woman he had betrayed. It was outrageous!

Arthur explained: "I know this is a surprise, and I don't want to hurt you. But I had to have a son, and now I do. It isn't the same as if you and I had him together, of course, but he *is* my son, and I've decided that we will care for him and raise him as our own—yours and mine. Someday, if he has the qualities, he'll be king." I never asked him who else might have contributed some of those qualities, and I have always refused to believe the vilest of gossip: that Mordred's mother was Arthur's own half-sister Morgause. That was too horrible even to contemplate.

But my reaction to Mordred himself was curious, even to me. After my initial shock and indignation passed, I actually felt pity for him. He seemed frightened and helpless, and I couldn't help imagining what it must be like for him to be taken away from his mother, whoever she was, when he was old enough to love her but too young to understand. But if I felt sorry for him, I also couldn't help thinking, every time I looked at him, about the way he had been conceived and about the way I had been treated by his father.

So I pitied Mordred and also felt some revulsion toward him, and the revulsion in turn made me feel guilt: I was punishing the child for something that was no fault of his. If there was fault, it was Arthur's, not Mordred's. After a while, I was able to stop blaming "Arthur's son," and I eventually decided, for the sake of our kingdom and my marriage and especially because I was sorry for Mordred, to care for him and do my best to love him. And I did do my best, but it was a very long time before I felt any affection for him.

And then, another irony: several years later, after I had finally begun to accept Mordred, his own father started to turn against him! I've never really forgiven Arthur for that, but most of all, I have always blamed Merlin. I'm sure that Merlin influenced Arthur to reject his son, just as I've always suspected that he came between Arthur and me.

I have mostly been avoiding the subject of Merlin, and I'd prefer to continue. It isn't a pleasant subject. But he has been so much a part of our world and Arthur's life that an account of those years can't be complete and honest if it omits him.

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No one really knew where Merlin came from. He was a strange little man who just appeared one day at court. When asked about himself, he gave an answer that made no sense at all (something about forests and lakes and "beings not of your kind"). He had to be asked several times before he replied that "those who need to name may call me Merlin." And since he continued to speak in riddles, little else was learned about him for a long time. I think that is the way he wanted it.

He quickly managed to become Arthur's confidant. I still don't know how he accomplished that. Arthur mentioned that the two had known each other earlier, even, I believe, when he drew the sword from the stone to prove his right to the throne. Beyond that, I never learned anything about Merlin's past. In any event, Arthur soon began to speak of Merlin's help, of the value of Merlin's advice, of Merlin's importance to the kingdom.

I never trusted Merlin, though. Why would he never explain clearly who he was and why he had come? What did he really want with—or rather *from*—Arthur? I couldn't escape the feeling that Merlin himself had personal or political ambitions. I eventually concluded that he wanted power and that he had decided that the best way to get it was to cultivate his influence over Arthur. Whatever his purposes might have been, I soon came to believe, and still do, that it was Merlin who gradually turned Arthur against me and eventually against Mordred.

But first things first. Merlin appeared eager to present himself as different from what he called "the mortal kind." He always avoided giving a straight answer to questions, and as I said, he spoke in riddles. He obviously wanted to make himself appear mysterious. He also seemed to want us to think he had special knowledge and special powers. And indeed, someone—Merlin himself, I think—spread rumors to that effect.

One of the first of those rumors was that, before a terrible battle, he had predicted death for either Uther or Uther's brother—he would not say which one. The brother, Arthur's uncle, was killed in that battle, and Merlin quickly took credit for prophecy—even though, since the battle was expected to be brutal, it was unlikely that both of the men could have survived in any case. I always thought it obvious that, if Merlin wouldn't say which one would die, it was because he didn't know and was just guessing that one of them, at least, would surely be killed. But other people overlooked that and took him as a seer and a great prophet. He encouraged that view.

During all those years, I believe, I had only one private conversation with Merlin. It was a time when Arthur and I were still reasonably happy. Merlin came into my room and asked, with exaggerated politeness, if he could talk with me. For once he dispensed with his enigmas; apparently this was a situation in which he thought clarity was preferable to mystification. So he said straight out, "We have to work together for the good of Arthur and his kingdom." (In fact, that was the clearest and most direct statement I ever heard him make.) I replied, just as directly, that that was all I had ever tried to do.

He seemed not to listen. Arthur, he said, was in a special position and had special needs, and there were threats to his power. Concentration was essential. It was all too easy for a man of his importance to be distracted, and it just wouldn't do. His attention must remain focused on his duty, on his work.

I remarked that I had never seen Arthur neglect his duty; indeed, sometimes I selfishly wished that his work took less of his time. Merlin shook his head and asked if he could speak frankly. Without waiting for my consent, he informed me bluntly that I was "a definite distraction, though a charming one, I'm sure," and that I was surely weakening the kingdom by weakening the king. I was shocked, both by the cruelty of the accusation and by how wrong Merlin was. And I was angry. I answered him: "Are you suggesting that I'm keeping Arthur from doing his duty? Well, he and I have been serving our people perfectly well for years—since long before you came along—and we'll be doing it long after you're gone!"

His answer was cryptic, or at least intended to be: "Self-delusion is the sharpest of swords." This was typical of Merlin: whenever he was challenged or his bluff was called, he would retreat further into his habit of riddling, of saying something mysterious that actually meant little or nothing. But I think I was beginning to understand his intent as well as his method.

After briefly trying to bully me, he suddenly changed tactics and again tried to present himself as my friend and ally. With a smile that I found more sinister than friendly, he said, "You and I shouldn't fight. We have common interests: we both want the best for Arthur. We want him to succeed, and we want to see his fame live on long after him. Well, he'll need our help for that."

I asked, with a sarcasm that he seemed not to notice, just what it was that needed to be done differently.

He replied, "Well, to begin with—you'll forgive me for speaking directly?—he can't be a proper king if he is spending his days in your bed while ambitious men are plotting against him in court."

At last he was coming to the point. But instead of defending myself or asking about the plots, I decided to take the offensive, and I asked, "Do those ambitious men include you, Merlin?"

Seeming to be shocked by the question and perhaps worried that he had, for once, spoken too clearly, he raised a forefinger for emphasis and replied in his most somber voice, "If power is a castle, ambition is its moat." He seemed enormously pleased with that pronouncement, and I'm sure some at court would have thought it profound; to me it just sounded silly, and I almost laughed out loud. I suddenly found myself thinking of Merlin more as a pompous fraud than as a dangerous man. And he surely was not, as he wanted everyone to believe he was, a mysterious half-human with remarkable powers.

I said to him, "If it is any of your concern, I intend to change nothing. My bed, which seems to worry you so much, is where Arthur is safest. My bed is the king's bed."

Merlin glared angrily at me. Then he replied, very quietly and ominously, "There are far more beds than yours, and they are all his if he wishes. A king has only to choose." With that, and before I could answer him, he left.

I misjudged Merlin. He may have been pompous—he certainly was that—but he was also dangerous. And he was patient as well. For a long time he seemed to have forgotten his threat, though he may simply have been securing his position as first among Arthur's advisors. But eventually I learned to my sorrow that Merlin was right: there were other beds. And Arthur had been in more than one.

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It is clear to me that Merlin had not stopped with predicting Arthur's infidelities: he must have encouraged them as well. And if that was true, he should have accepted what they produced. But instead, he seemed to disapprove of Mordred and actually seemed threatened by him. Lancelot told me later that Merlin had expressed concern for the kingdom if Mordred should ever rule it. But I thought Merlin was just as concerned

for his own position: if he hoped to rule through Arthur—or especially *after* Arthur—his plans could obviously be jeopardized by a child, even a child born in sin, who might someday expect to be king.

So Merlin first turned against me and then started to turn Arthur away from me. Now he was trying to come between Arthur and Mordred. I think he was just jealous of *any* human relationship, perhaps because he himself had none. He began to malign and ridicule the child; eventually, as if to make him seem less human, he stopped calling him by his name and actually started referring to him in crude terms related to the circumstances of his birth. There could no longer be any real doubt that Merlin wanted to prevent Mordred from assuming the throne after Arthur: more than once he was heard to say (though in terms far less delicate than these) that no one born out of wedlock should be allowed to rule. I was surprised and disappointed that Arthur would permit anyone, even Merlin, to talk that way about his son.

It may be that Arthur didn't really listen at first. But Merlin's influence with him was by now nearly absolute, and after a while Arthur's attitude toward his son began to change. It happened slowly, but I could see it clearly enough. He first started referring to Mordred as "the boy" and eventually spoke of him in the same terms used by Merlin. But for me, the greatest shock came after another year or two, when Arthur decided that Mordred was not worthy of a crown—or even of a father's love. And he told him that!

Even now, I wonder if there is more I could have done. Probably not. As Merlin's influence increased, my own seemed to wane. At times Arthur seemed almost a stranger. In public he stopped calling me by name, just as he had done with Mordred; he referred to me simply as "the queen" or even more coldly as "she." The distance between us now became a gulf, and our silences, which had once been warm and intimate, became painful. By now I had had to accept the fact that Arthur preferred the company of other women (and of his friends, and of Merlin) to that of his wife. And Arthur had apparently decided that, although I was convenient or even "ornamental"

(one of Merlin's favorite terms for a woman), I was not someone to spend too much of his time with. So Merlin had won.

I made one final attempt to discuss this with Arthur, saying that I hoped we could again be husband and wife, lovers, and partners in fashioning the future of our kingdom. He responded, with the exaggerated sigh of a long-suffering martyr, "It's far too late for that."

That was the last time I tried to have that discussion.

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Although Merlin had won, he was not through. If it was his intent, as it obviously was, to ensure his own power by alienating Arthur from everyone close to him, there was one more obstacle to be removed. Arthur now had little to do with me outside of our public functions, and he had rejected Mordred. But there was still Lancelot. So Merlin set to work.

There is no certain proof that it was Merlin's doing, but to me there can be no doubt. He must be the one responsible for turning Arthur's nephews against Lancelot. For some reason, he chose not to talk directly to Arthur about Lancelot, as he had about Mordred. He probably just realized that there was an easier way: he surely knew that the nephews, and Agravain especially, were jealous and resentful of Lancelot, because Arthur clearly loved him better than them. (Arthur now referred to Lancelot as his "true son.") So Merlin obviously set Agravain against him. It probably didn't take much effort; Agravain was always ready and even eager to think the worst of anyone.

The irony is that I don't think either Merlin or Agravain knew of Lancelot's and my love. I think Merlin simply invented it as the easiest way to turn Arthur against Lancelot, and even further against me. It is of course perfectly acceptable for the king to have other women, but if a woman loves another man (or someone even thinks she does), she is considered a traitor and a woman of easy virtue. So if Merlin could incite Agravain to denounce me to the king, and if the accusations were given any credence at all, Merlin would no longer have any rivals for

the king's trust. And with Arthur completely in his power, Merlin would practically be ruling in the king's place.

Agravain was easily convinced, of course, and soon he was barely able to contain his anger in my presence. I later learned that he presented his reactions as concern for his uncle and for his lands, but it was completely obvious to me that he was simply jealous of Lancelot, as he was of anyone who was happy and successful.

Both because of the danger to us and, to some extent, because of guilt or a lingering sense of wifely duty or morality, I sometimes insisted that Lancelot and I not see each other except in public. But even as I was insisting, I was imagining us together and feeling sorrow that I was rejecting the only person who could bring me happiness. But the separations were never long: we overcame our feelings of guilt. Lancelot and I simply accepted our happiness.

I confess, and no longer with embarrassment, that the guilt was not great. I wasn't sure whether that was due to my love for Lancelot or to my resentment at being rejected by Arthur. If Arthur no longer wanted much to do with me, perhaps I was seeking revenge. But even when I wondered about that, I never doubted that my love for Lancelot was real and sincere.

Then, when we were together one day, Agravain and his men burst into my room. Instinctively, I called to Lancelot to save himself. (If he were captured or killed, my fate would be the same as his, but if he were free, I knew he would come back for me, and we'd both be saved.) He hesitated, as if tempted to fight the whole group of armed men, but then he turned, looked at me—I knew that he could read my thoughts—and fled through the other door, striking one man but evading all the others. I was arrested, and Arthur visited me, not to comfort me but to complain angrily about the way I had treated him. And when I asked for his help, he responded that there was nothing he could do. Laws must be enforced. People have the right to expect that. The law is the law.

I realized even then that Agravain's plan must have been approved in advance by Arthur; otherwise, he would not have dared to do what he did. Unless Arthur wanted Lancelot

captured or dead, Agravain's actions would have been improper; and if he had harmed *me* while acting on his own, that would constitute treason. So it is obvious that Arthur knew and approved. I still find that hard to believe, but there is no other explanation.

Everything that happened after that is almost too painful to tell, and it is known to everyone anyway. When Lancelot rescued me, as I knew he would, Arthur condemned *him* as a traitor. That is untrue and unfair: Lancelot loved Arthur as if the king were his own father, and he could never have betrayed him. It was simply our fate that Lancelot and I also loved each other.

He had to flee, stopping only to leave me here at the convent, and Arthur pursued him with his whole army. I shudder to think what might have happened if the two armies had met. The only two men I had ever loved might have died fighting each other.

But then, ironically (and of course without intending to), Mordred saved Lancelot. Arthur's son betrayed his father and his land by trying to seize power while Arthur was away. The king had to give up the pursuit. He returned and fought Mordred rather than Lancelot.

So for once, Merlin proved to be right. He had spread rumors that Mordred was both ambitious and immoral and that he could not be trusted. That turned out to be true. It was disturbing and saddening for me to learn that Mordred was a traitor. Although he was disillusioned and embittered by Arthur's rejection of him, I would never have thought him a traitor. I even suspected that Merlin had somehow manipulated Mordred as he manipulated everyone else, but there was no way to know.

But whatever the reasons for Mordred's actions, at least they saved Lancelot's life. But they cost Arthur's.

*

I learned of Arthur's death long after it happened. I was told that he and Mordred had killed each other in battle. Oddly, I

found myself grieving for Mordred: traitor or not, he was pitiful, and I could not hate him. It sometimes worries me that I didn't grieve for Arthur in the same way as for Mordred. It was not that I was untouched by the king's death—far from it—but what I felt for him was not quite grief, but just a strange and terrible sadness, for a promise not kept—for what he had once been and for what he had then become.

Arthur was never an evil man. At worst he was a weak man, too much in Merlin's power. If there was evil, it was incarnated in Merlin, and of course in Agravain. Arthur had once been a very good man. He had been kind and gentle, and I had loved him. But all that had changed so very long ago.

There are those who swear that they saw Arthur's body after the battle with Mordred. They say it was taken away on a ship, and it has not been seen since. Others, believing what they want to believe, have insisted that he was not dead. I have even heard it said that, because Britain needs him, Arthur can *never* die. For his sake, I would not want that to be true: in a world filled with sorrow, mortality is mercy.

And in my own heart I know he is dead. And it has always tormented me that he has not had a proper burial and that there is no monument to him. At least he deserved that.

*

Only once, after all these events, did Lancelot come here to see me. Without warning, he was simply here. Seeing him, I knew that I still loved him as much as ever. I didn't say that; there was no need to. In fact, for a few moments, neither of us said anything. Then we began to talk just as if we had seen each other the day before. The sensation was strange because it was *not* strange: nothing had changed between us except the circumstances of our lives.

He told me that, like me, he was going to withdraw from the world and spend his remaining days in a monastery, working and praying. We talked about Arthur, about us, about hope and hopelessness—and we held each other for a long time. Then we sat together in a silence that was at the same time exquisite and

sad, and then he left. Curiously, there were no tears. I suppose it was just too late for tears.

Often now, I'm comforted on cold evenings by my knowledge that Lancelot, somewhere, is leading the same life as I. And I am comforted even more to know that he loves me and to imagine that he may be thinking the same thoughts as I, and perhaps at the same time as I. With Arthur, in the later years, there was a gulf between us when we were together; but I am with Lancelot even when we are a world apart.

And soon we will be together again. So now I'm simply waiting for the end of this long winter.

* * *

The queen had often paused while talking, and sometimes the pauses lasted for a very long time. So I sat patiently, ready to take down more of her words. This time, none came. I sat in silence until finally I began to feel like an intruder. I decided to leave her with her thoughts, and I quietly got up to go. At the door, I turned to look back at her. She sat motionless, staring into dying embers. It seemed to me that, for the first time, she looked very old. I left her, as I had all the other days, but this time I knew she had told me all she had to say: her story was ended, and not just for today. As she herself said, she was now just waiting.

And I found myself almost hoping, for her sake, that the wait would not be long.

The Mordred Manuscript

“Arthur should have more dread of me than I of him.”

—*Mordred*

On a late autumn afternoon heavy with fog, on Salisbury Plain, King Arthur was brutally struck down by his own son, Mordred. Though critically wounded, the king was able to return the blow, killing Mordred and thereby avenging the treason. Thus came to a close the brief but glorious reign of Arthur, who ruled benevolently and instituted a system of justice that dealt as fairly with the downtrodden as with the powerful, as sternly with the rich as with the poor.

As the grievously wounded king lay suffering on the shore, a ship appeared from out of the fog. In it were three women, and as the ship landed, one of the women left it, came to Arthur, and took him

aboard. A fresh breeze came up and quickly swept the ship away from shore. Arthur disappeared.

There was but a single witness to this disappearance. He swore that Arthur was still living. Many believed it, and many still do: the king was taken away to have his wounds tended, and when our need is greatest, he will return once again.

*

““He has about him all the signs of bastardy. Shifting eyes and shiftless ways. Dark and nervous and sinister: a bastard through and through. And a bastard must never be allowed to rule.”

“And that,” said Mordred to John of Carlisle, “is how Merlin described me to Arthur. But of course he inverted cause and effect: they made me what I am and then blamed *me*. And however much he may be concerned about what I am, Merlin is far more concerned for himself. Merlin is a myth created by Merlin. He is oracle, singer and bard, and sage advisor to the king. In fact, this bard often speaks in verse or at least in rhythmic prose that he seems to consider wise and memorable. I’d wager that he very carefully composes each day’s pronouncements—words and rhythm—the night before. If we could see Blaise’s book, I’m sure we’d find Merlin’s statement, ‘He has about him all the signs of bastardy.’”

John smiled and said, “Just as mine will contain your statement, ‘They made me what I am and then blamed me?’ Lilting, isn’t it?”

Mordred ignored the barb and continued: “So I want to set the record straight. The truth needs to be *told*, not *sold*, and the Magician sells it. He invents it and peddles it publicly. A lie, if enough people can be persuaded to believe it, becomes the truth.”

“And what,” asked John, “is Merlin’s truth?”

“First, that Arthur is far more than a great, benevolent king, that he is worthy of veneration nearly as a god. And second—but

barely second—that Merlin is no less great, no less worthy of veneration, a half-human with powers that are beyond the comprehension of ordinary beings. And he expects to accomplish that through his little tricks!”

Surprised by the viciousness of Mordred’s jealousy, John replied, “Perhaps there is more to Merlin than ‘little tricks.’”

And Mordred answered, enigmatically, “And if you believe that, perhaps he has succeeded.” Then, after a brief pause, he said again, as he would say repeatedly in the weeks to come, “I have to set the record straight.” (John wondered, but did not ask, whether Mordred was interested in the record about Arthur or about himself, Arthur’s bastard son.)

“And since Merlin is busily telling his lies to Blaise, who writes them down for posterity, I can do no less.” John smiled at the unintended meaning but again said nothing. Mordred continued: “You will be my Blaise. You’ll write my story, and together we will tell the truth about Arthur and about Merlin.”

Thus did Mordred find his scribe in John of Carlisle, an obscure scholar who thereafter recorded Mordred’s story on small vellum leaves crudely strung together with heavy thread. Writing in a neat and orderly hand, John started with a factual and impersonal, almost detached, account of Mordred’s early life. Gradually, however, he added more detail, indicating dialogue more frequently and even commenting on the story he had to tell. Those changes were doubtless due both to Mordred’s progressive involvement in great events and to the writer’s increasing interest in them.

Perhaps it is curious that John even accepted this commission. He could not have been unaware of Mordred’s reputation as an embittered and disagreeable young man who spent his time skulking about the castle, associating with equally disagreeable men, and finding intrigues and plots—usually against him—in the most innocent words or acts. But perhaps John saw something in Mordred that others had not seen. Perhaps he was intrigued by the references to some hidden truth concerning Arthur and Merlin. Or perhaps he merely had literary ambitions of which, until then, even he had been

unaware. Whatever the reason, he accepted the offer with an alacrity that even he must have found surprising.

This, then, is an account of John's account of Mordred's account of his brief, unhappy life.

*

Mordred began by telling of the idyllic years of his earliest childhood. He explained that he was loved and spoiled by his parents, and he adored them in return. His memories were of castles, feasts, games, and a succession of happy visitors. Having known nothing but pleasure, he could not conceive of any other existence. Of course, he did not see Arthur daily, or even regularly, but the king came to see him when royal duties permitted it; as a child, Mordred had a vague notion that his father was busy "being a king." He had no idea what that entailed, of course, but it was obviously important, because people spoke of Arthur in reverent tones. When the king did come to spend an hour with him, he always said that Mordred made his life worthwhile.

But that happy state could not, and did not, endure. Mordred sometimes said he went to bed one night as a child loved by his father and awoke the following morning as . . . a nobody, an orphan, an insect, or a leper (he always began the sentence in identical fashion, but ended it in a variety of ways). John suspected that it did not change that abruptly; rather, Mordred had simply become more aware of a situation that had gradually evolved. He began to realize that those "happy visitors" were not necessarily happy to see *him*. Arthur began to avoid taking him out in public, and when family friends heartily greeted Arthur, they would awkwardly pat Mordred's head or, more often, simply ignore him entirely.

In any case, it was not long, said Mordred, until "I started to understand that something was wrong with me. I was obviously not as good as the other children; people didn't want to talk to me or be seen with me, and soon other children started calling me names." Yet Mordred was puzzled by these attitudes, because he knew that his father was the king, praised and

practically worshiped wherever he went. Everyone deferred to the queen, too, and even to those close to the royal family. "Why not me?" Only later did he begin to understand why not.

If Mordred was hurt and perplexed by being less favored than other members of the royal family, he eventually started speaking of his resentment at being displaced in Arthur's affections by particular people. Initially that resentment was directed at his cousins Gawain and Gareth. Arthur was frequently heard to make statements to the effect that he loved Gawain more than himself. Often he said that he loved Gawain more than any man alive, though on occasion he would also comment, apparently unaware that he was contradicting himself, that the only man he could love more than Gawain was Gareth, to whom he sometimes referred as "my favorite." To Mordred, it mattered little which one really was Arthur's favorite: *he* clearly was not, and he was bitterly resentful and sad that his own father openly expressed his preference for his nephews over his son.

Mordred sought to excel at everything, surely in an effort to win back the affection that Arthur had once had for him. The young man readily admitted that he was a mediocre musician and poet, but he claimed, without obvious boasting, that he was among the best at court at riding, at jousting, at swordsmanship. John speculates that Mordred systematically chose the endeavors he thought Arthur would value, and everyone knew that the only arts to which Arthur was devoted were martial.

In any case, however well Mordred performed, his father remained unmoved, continuing to praise Gareth or Gawain or someone else, but doing his best to ignore his own son. Indeed, on one occasion Mordred defeated Gareth decisively in a joust, and instead of offering the praise Mordred anticipated for his skill, Arthur expressed only concern for Gareth, hurrying to reassure himself that his nephew was not injured in the unceremonious fall from his horse. Injured or not, Gareth could not have felt pain more searing than Mordred's.

Later, of course, that resentment, like Arthur's affections, would be shifted to Lancelot. The arrival of Lancelot, a young French knight, may have been the beginning of the end for

Mordred. Arthur welcomed him with the hospitality he offered to all knights who came peaceably to court, but very quickly Mordred became aware that Lancelot was not like all the others. Arthur seemed particularly drawn to him, and he either kept Lancelot near him or, not infrequently, asked the queen to entertain Lancelot. She never appeared reluctant to offer her services. Soon Arthur and Lancelot were nearly inseparable—except when the young Frenchman was otherwise occupied in the queen's chamber.

Not that Arthur went to any great lengths to conceal his affection for Lancelot. He began to praise him in the same terms he had formerly reserved for Gawain and Gareth, but curiously (said Mordred, with more than a trace of bitterness), Lancelot seems to have done very little to merit that praise. He rarely jousts or participated in other physical activity—or, at least, “*public* physical activity,” as Mordred once suggested, adding, with all the sarcasm he could muster, that “I can certainly understand why Lancelot had no energy for such things.”

His impression, in fact, was that Lancelot was both effete and more than a little dull-witted. “He’s a prissy little man,” said Mordred, “but if you listen to the king, Lancelot is the finest knight who ever set foot in this land. Arthur insists that Lancelot can defeat anyone in battle—but curiously, no one has ever seen evidence of that. Arthur also says that Lancelot is an excellent rider—and that may be, but his favorite mount is not a horse!” John of Carlisle dutifully recorded all such scandalous statements, giving no indication of shock or disbelief; perhaps he too had heard rumors about Lancelot and Guinevere.

It was not unusual, John noted, for Mordred to arrive showing the obvious effects of excessive drink; and whenever he was in that state, he could be expected to talk about Lancelot, as well as to reminisce about his own happy childhood. John seems to have considered Mordred a troubled and strange young man, although his scribal duty made him careful never to say so directly.

Mordred himself soon made it clear that he *was* troubled, perhaps by his own contradictory feelings, when his cousins (especially Agravain) began plotting against Lancelot. He told

John on more than one occasion that he resented Agravain less than the others; perhaps that was because Agravain himself was a resentful and sullen young man, something of an outcast and clearly less the recipient of Arthur's affection than were his three brothers: Gawain, Gareth, and Gaheriet. Consequently, when it became clear that Agravain in particular was seeking an opportunity to reveal Lancelot's and Guinevere's affair to Arthur, Mordred welcomed and probably encouraged the effort. "Agravain is frankly a hateful and malicious man, but we got on well enough. And, after all, he was trying to destroy Lancelot, and Lancelot was committing adultery, and adultery with the queen is also high treason. So really, he was only doing his patriotic duty."

Although Mordred often spoke ill of Arthur, he nevertheless seemed to have a strong residue of affection for him. (Or perhaps it was not affection, but only a matter of guilt at having turned against his father.) Yet, when talk turned to Lancelot and his treason with the queen, Mordred's eyes would immediately turn cold and hard. Then his attitude, not only toward the lovers but also toward the king, could be uncompromisingly cruel and cynical. He suggested more than once that Arthur may actually have known, or at least suspected, the nature of the relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere and that he consciously chose to dismiss the rumors. The problem, he pointed out, was that if Arthur gave credence to gossip, he would *have* to act against his wife and his "dearest friend" (said Mordred sarcastically). Denial was the king's only defense.

In fact, Mordred often alluded to rumors—he said they were rampant in court—to the effect that Arthur's attachment to Lancelot was "unnatural." John was never able to determine whether there really were rumors or whether they were simply an idea that grew out of Mordred's jealousy. In any event, the young man occasionally suggested that the king was more strongly attracted to Lancelot than to Guinevere; that would explain, perhaps too neatly, why Arthur consistently resisted the urging of his entourage to learn once and for all the truth about the lovers and to take appropriate action against Lancelot: he

would have had to punish the man whose affection he most desired.

Of course, there was a perfectly good explanation that had nothing to do with improper attractions between men: if it was indeed true, as Arthur often said, that Lancelot was his best knight, then there was good reason for Arthur to want to maintain the *status quo*. And, of course, the two explanations are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Mordred also reported to John rumors that Arthur had fathered another child; once, when these rumors reached the king's ears, he did not deny them but—as Mordred put it—“muttered some nonsense about being tricked into believing that the woman he was sleeping with was Guinevere.”

(Mordred commented that in concocting this response Arthur must have been inspired by stories about his own mother, who slept with a total stranger, Uther Pendragon, and then denied guilt by proclaiming that “he looked just like my husband.” Mordred found that explanation ludicrous and also scoffed at the story, sometimes told in order to illustrate Merlin's powers and also, perhaps, to excuse the inexcusable, that the Magician had transformed the lovesick Uther into the likeness of the woman's husband.)

Whatever the truth behind the rumors of another child fathered by Arthur, Mordred reacted more violently to them than to any of the presumed affronts he ever received directly from the king. The vehemence of his words on this subject led John to speculate that perhaps unconsciously—or perhaps not—Mordred was thinking of his own conception out of wedlock. For the only time in John's conversations with Mordred, the young man's attitude toward his father was unambiguous: he called him “That fool!” and added, “Bastardy certainly seems to run in the family.”

Although clearly out of favor with Arthur, Mordred continued to suppose for a long time that, as the only son (or at least the only one whose existence was widely known), he would be king one day. “It had never occurred to me,” he pointed out, “that I wouldn't succeed my father. Unfortunately, my father had other ideas.”

The number of times Mordred returned to this subject, sometimes more than once in the same conversation—made it clear that one of the defining moments of his life occurred the day Arthur told him that he lacked what it would take to be king. Specifically, he lacked talent and diplomacy, but above all he lacked character. The young man pressed the point, insisting that he was “every bit as good as Lancelot. Arthur seemed shocked that I would be so presumptuous as to compare myself to ‘his favorite.’ Of course, he disputed it, and when I argued, he became more and more agitated, until he finally screamed, ‘Nobody will accept a bastard as king!’ That was a slap in the face, and without thinking, I said, ‘Of course they will: they accepted you!’”

Recounting this, Mordred seemed shocked by his own effrontery and explained almost apologetically to John that, technically, Arthur was not a bastard. True, he was conceived out of wedlock—there was, again, that preposterous story about his mother-to-be, a married woman, mistaking a stranger for her husband—but after the woman was widowed, Uther married her before Arthur’s birth and thus salvaged his legal status.

But even as he offered a halfhearted defense of his father, Mordred was clearly stung by the injustice, which seemed to relegate him to less than human status. He was still astonished that he was considered simply not good enough: competence is insufficient. And in fact, as he noted—“It’s as if I *chose* to be born a bastard!”—he was disqualified for reasons having nothing to do with competence: he was being punished for the sins of his father, while his father blithely ignored those sins and rejected the son they produced. Mordred, obviously, could never reconcile himself to his disqualification and to the fundamental injustice underlying it.

At times, though, without concealing his animosity toward his father, Mordred seemed particularly concerned with the dangers inherent in what he saw as Arthur’s corruption. “He was blind to anything concerning Merlin and Lancelot. Anyone who cared to look around could have known that Lancelot was making horns for Arthur, but Father refused to see it or at least to face it, and everyone else was afraid to tell him.

“It was not just that I resented Lancelot—though I don’t deny that I did. But I began to realize that ‘Arthur’s favorite knight’ had the king in the palm of his hand and that, if he ever cared to leave the queen’s bed for long enough, he could actually rule the kingdom. On the other hand, Arthur was concerned enough about his place in history that he surely wouldn’t tolerate anything or anyone who might limit his power and compromise his reputation. So I had the idea that I could make an important contribution to his rule and at the same time remove my chief rival for his affection: all I had to do was tell him about Lancelot and Guinevere.”

This was not the only time Mordred spoke about such attempts to “help” Arthur by denouncing Lancelot. These conversations were often followed by a long pause, in which Mordred’s face would harden (if he was sober) or the silence might be broken by violent obscenities (if he was not). Often he would then change the subject abruptly, leading John to speculate that Mordred might be concocting this explanation as he went, perhaps in order to present himself in a better light.

Once, though, after the pause, Mordred went on, in a soft, almost expressionless voice: “And when I finally told him, he accused *me* of treachery, jealousy, and disloyalty! He even told me that he was now sure, if he had ever had any doubts, that I was not worthy of succeeding him. He said that I didn’t even deserve to call him ‘Father.’ It was only then that I realized just how far things had gone.”

When John asked Mordred to explain that last comment, the answer was a rambling statement about Arthur’s desire for immortality. “Posterity,” according to Mordred, was initially a matter of considerable but normal and legitimate concern to Arthur; later it became an obsession. The king understood the value of symbols both to crystallize his “image” as king and to transmit the essence of his regime to future generations. He clearly appreciated the importance of image but just as clearly confused the image itself with the person it represented. Accordingly, he set about, with the advice and assistance of Merlin, to “create King Arthur” (as Mordred put it).

Little by little, Merlin had supplanted Lancelot as the primary object of Mordred's ire. It became increasingly clear that Mordred intensely disliked and distrusted Merlin, but he also appeared to fear him in a way that he never feared Lancelot. Questioned at length about his view of Merlin, Mordred finally let it be known that he had long considered the Magician to be at the core of his problems. He thought Merlin a dangerous man: the Magician could not be trusted, and yet the Magician had the king's ear.

First of all, Merlin rarely referred to Mordred in any way other than "Arthur's bastard" or, to avoid implying that Arthur was in any way responsible, simply "the bastard." Mordred understandably resented this personal affront, but he insisted to John that it was unimportant: more crucial was Merlin's role in the king's transformation from kindly monarch into ambitious tyrant. Arthur had been a well-meaning and compassionate king until he came under Merlin's influence. The latter obviously had serious ambitions of his own, and if he was (perhaps curiously) content to be the power behind the throne, he wanted to be certain that that throne ruled the world and that its occupant wielded absolute power—which would mean that *he* would do so as well. "He chose to rule by ruling the ruler," said Mordred.

Mordred never explained clearly how he knew that Merlin had corrupted Arthur. He would say only that "It was obvious to anyone willing to see," but it was uncertain just how many people, if anyone besides Mordred, did see it. He himself saw "many things," he said; his status (or rather, lack of status) at court actually freed him to wander around largely unnoticed, watching and listening to everything.

Mordred insisted that if he was cast aside by Arthur, it was entirely Merlin's fault: "He started talking to Father about me. I know; people told me. Once I even overheard him saying, 'Your bastard will probably try to take over.' Little did he know!" said Mordred flatly. Asked what he meant by that, Mordred evaded the question and spoke again about the way Merlin had carefully set about turning Arthur against his own son. Mordred

suggested that the Magician had thought it necessary to do so in order to solidify his own position as the principal among Arthur's intimates. Whatever the motives, it was clear to the young man that Merlin saw him as the primary obstacle to be removed, and he was certain that it was Merlin who, more than anyone else, had persuaded Arthur that his son was a fool and a coward and that it was simply not right for a great monarch to consider setting his crown one day on the head of a bastard.

Mordred's hatred for Merlin expressed itself most clearly in the way he referred to this man who called *him* "the bastard." Rarely, except in his first conversation with John, did Mordred simply call him "Merlin," unless with a mocking imitation of deference in his voice. He often called him "the Magician" or "the Enchanter," always in a voice dripping with sarcasm and bitterness. (And the capitals, presumably an imitation of Mordred's tone, appear in John's manuscript.) However, he most often referred to Merlin as "Merdin," explaining once that the name had originally been "Myrddin" in Welsh, becoming "Merдинus" in Latin and "Merdin" in French. As those suggested "dung," the Enchanter changed his name, but Mordred insisted that "the original name is the most accurate" and continued to call him Merdin.

At this point in the manuscript, there is a curious paragraph in which John speculates on Mordred's motives. Was Mordred simply fabricating the notion of a Merlin who was a menace? Was the fabrication the result of Mordred's wounded ego? Or could it be that Merlin actually *was* systematically transforming the king into a tyrant who would reject his son and his own nature?

In any event, there seems little doubt that, having turned father against son, Merlin then turned his attention to "creating" the indomitable and immortal King Arthur. "Merdin was Arthur's propaganda advisor. He recognized the need to manipulate images, and I have to admit that he was a master at it; after all, he had created the image of *Merlin*, who was both wiser and more powerful than mere human beings." Merlin was—or tried to make himself into—a shadowy and elusive figure, flamboyant only when he took center stage to make some

pompous pronouncement. He tried to speak in enigmas, said Mordred, because he knew that people are impressed by the brilliance of whatever they cannot understand.

Whenever any noteworthy event occurred, Merlin could be expected to point out that he had foretold it in a prophetic announcement. Most often, he would say to Arthur, "Sir, don't you remember that I predicted that?" and Arthur, reluctant to contradict his friend (or perhaps refusing to admit to the forgetfulness that comes with age), would obediently respond, "Oh. Yes. Of course."

Mordred found it surprising that no one ever questioned Merlin's powers, at least not publicly. "How could it be that I'm the only one to know he's a charlatan? Once I overheard Merdin asking about an unknown knight who had just arrived; less than an hour later, he astonished the court, demonstrating his gift of second sight by relating the very facts he had just discovered."

Whatever the truth, Merlin's methods, though crude and (to Mordred) transparent, proved effective, and soon there were few people left who were not persuaded that Merlin was a half-human, half-god who possessed the most extraordinary powers. Before long, he was credited with every sort of absurd feat, from speaking when he was a newborn baby to building Stonehenge to foretelling the future. Mordred once said that, of course, Merlin had to claim the ability to see the future, since his memory of the past, "including his own name," was decidedly defective.

Be that as it may, Merlin was obviously an effective architect of the legend of King Arthur. Thus Merlin and the king propagated the idea that Arthur's royal destiny was revealed when, as a mere boy, he had drawn a special sword from an anvil atop a block of marble. Mordred, telling this story on more than one occasion, remarked with great sarcasm and some bitterness just how odd it was that no one could ever be found who had actually witnessed "this marvelous event"; many people claimed to have been there, but when pressed for details (or, sometimes, confronted by the fact that "the event" had occurred before they were born), they had to admit that they had heard about it "from someone who was really there."

Nevertheless, said Mordred, everyone retold the story endlessly and always assured the listeners that “all those who gathered there to watch were astonished, and when they had all tried and failed to draw the sword from the anvil, they bowed before him and proclaimed him king.”

According to Mordred, it was also Merlin’s idea to create the myth of Excalibur, the notion that a magical being (“or at least the soggy hand of one,” said Mordred) emerged briefly from a deep lake to deliver an equally magical sword, which would serve as the symbol of Arthur’s glorious reign.

Merlin then conceived of a Round Table, intended to perpetuate the notion of equality among his knights. However, as Mordred pointed out, “Arthur was never inclined to admit that the others were *his* equal.” And, in fact, for a long time the king had all his knights sit equally at the Round Table, while he himself sat at his own table apart from the others. He took his place at the Round Table only after Merlin suggested it, hinting that “it doesn’t look good” for the king to be apart or aloof and that the appearance of democracy could be “very helpful.”

No less important than the idea of equality was the visual appeal of the Round Table and the hall it occupied. Mordred described the latter as an enormous meeting hall, unfurnished except for the table and chairs. The walls and the high vaulted ceiling were pierced at carefully calculated points, such that if the knights convened at just the right time of day—and of course that exact time was always chosen—spikes of light struck the regal chair where Arthur sat and the gold dish that occupied the center of the table and was considered holy. Eventually, stories about the dish were circulated to make the king out to be “some kind of religious hero as well as a great ruler.”

Arthur appeared as much under the influence of Merlin as of Lancelot, but in different ways, of course. Whereas he seems to have thought of himself as the advisor, almost the patron, of Lancelot, he looked up to Merlin as a teacher and sage, a situation that Mordred found far more dangerous. Whatever the king thought of the two of them, said Mordred, “he is so much in their power that he no longer makes decisions on his own. The great King Arthur is now the puppet of two people who

care nothing for the well-being of the realm. And they are dangerous: one has the king's *ear*; the other has his *wife*!"

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Mordred seemed increasingly troubled by developments at court. On several occasions he hinted darkly at what he called Arthur's "master plan" and once added, almost under his breath, that "he will never get away with it." When pressed for an explanation, Mordred would decline to discuss it further and would change the subject. Only much later did he explain: he had heard Arthur complain bitterly one day that he had been king for all this time and yet he was king of such a small piece of the world. Merlin in response had said something to the effect, "You need to be patient only a little longer."

Startled by what he took to be an ominous statement, Mordred began to listen to bits of conversation whenever he could. Most made no sense until the day he overheard a brief and chillingly casual discussion about how many deaths would be a reasonable price to pay to accomplish Arthur's goals. Merlin had said, "You know, many thousands could die." And without the slightest hesitation, Arthur answered, "That's acceptable."

Suddenly, to his horror, Mordred understood: Merlin, and consequently Arthur, simply wanted the rest of the world! Many of the conversations Mordred had overheard from time to time began to make sense, and he became convinced that the two were scheming to mount a massive offensive on one army after another, one country after another, in an attempt to crush all of them with such lightning speed and ruthless force that none would have time to evaluate his intentions and organize strong defensive (or offensive) action against him.

For a long time Mordred refused to believe what he now understood. To believe it would be to accept that Merlin or Arthur or both of them must be evil far beyond what he could admit or comprehend. "My father may be putty in Merdin's hands, but I know he's a good man at heart, and he wouldn't let

himself be turned into a monster.” It was unclear whether Mordred wanted to convince John of Carlisle or himself.

In trying to puzzle out the truth, Mordred talked of Arthur’s early military conquests and wondered if they had given him a thirst for more. As a newmade king, Arthur had easily enough put down tribal rebellions and had then overrun islands and small countries, none of them able to mount any significant defense. Mordred defended the tribal wars—“It was a clear choice between civilization and chaos”—but was at a loss to understand the conquest of small nations that presented neither a threat nor any strategic importance. “It’s incomprehensible,” he once said, “that the world’s most powerful army would invade one of the tiniest islands!”

But somehow—and Mordred attributed it to “Merlin”—the brutal subjugation of weak and fragmented armies contributed to the myth of Arthur as an inspired and courageous military leader. And, for the sake of anyone who might question the morality of going to war simply for the sake of demonstrating power, Arthur and Merlin were always able to point to some “act of aggression,” often insignificant and perhaps contrived, that “demanded a military response.”

John seems uncertain just when Mordred decided that someone must take matters into his own hands to deal with Arthur’s expanding territorial ambitions and his willingness to take any necessary measures to accomplish them. Mordred had come several times, over a period of weeks, to talk with John about Arthur’s increasing thirst for power. The king had begun to speak of “my kingdom,” “my rights,” “my system,” and so on, and when he talked of “my people,” the implication, at least to Mordred, was that he considered them his property rather than his subjects.

“Somebody has to do something,” said Mordred, quietly.

Then, for a month or more, he avoided the subject. Eventually, he returned to it, announcing that he had been forced to conclude that no one else would do anything—everyone was either spellbound by the “myth of Arthur” or intimidated by the king—and that he himself must “make the sacrifice. I decided that for the good of the kingdom, I have to

put aside my resentment of other knights and my anger at being rejected by my father. Those things are ultimately unimportant. And I know that any attempt to take action may require me to sacrifice my life. That's not a decision I've made easily, but one person is a small price to pay to save the kingdom. No one else will do it. So I'll have to."

John, initially unable to draw any more information out of Mordred, appears to have been unsure whether the young man had in fact discovered a plot and decided to sacrifice himself to foil it, or whether he was indulging instead in a supreme act of self-delusion, rationalizing his desire to destroy a society that had victimized him.

Whatever his motives, Mordred did begin to speak differently, talking occasionally of his own mortality; and once he pointed out, when he and John were discussing political matters in general, that "anyone who decides to take someone's life for political purposes is a murderer unless he gives up his own at the same time."

Mordred said that Merlin, as if anticipating some radical action by "Arthur's bastard," had begun a new campaign of libelous rumors about him. Mordred is a bitter and scheming man. Mordred is a bastard who is jealous of those who merit their positions of honor. Mordred hates his father. If anything happened to Arthur, it would be a tragedy for the realm and would make a martyr of the king, whose posterity is ensured. Mordred is a mean-spirited man capable of the most despicable acts.

During this time, and despite the Magician's calumny, Mordred's mood curiously became more calm and placid, and he talked less and less about his jealousies and resentments. He no longer appeared to be angry. His harangues became rare.

Instead, he would sometimes launch into long and rambling monologues about the corruptibility of public figures, about the destructive effects of ambition, and about the duties of individuals. "The irony," he once said, "is that the person who makes the ultimate sacrifice will probably be considered a traitor, when in fact he's actually trying to save the world and

the king alike. But that's irrelevant, because you have to do what is right, regardless of how history will treat you."

Another time: "Why won't somebody do something? They are all like sheep. Arthur is about to plunge the world into a war nobody can win. But he thinks *he* can win it. That's the problem with propaganda: the people who create it start to believe it. More and more, Arthur lives his life in a fantasy world created for him by the Magician." John asked him for details about the war he expected, but Mordred merely responded, "You couldn't even comprehend the enormity of this tragedy."

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Then, one day, Mordred arrived almost breathless, with a curiously intense expression on his face. "It's about to begin," he said simply.

John asked, "What's about to begin?"

"The war! It won't be long. And it won't *last* long, either, unless I do something." He went on to say, quietly, "I want you to write down the events of these last days. They need to be known and remembered. It isn't important what people think of me, so you can say about me whatever you wish. But—provided I can prevent a cataclysm—it *is* important for history to know just how close we came."

He then explained (somewhat pompously, John thought) that "the answer, like Lancelot, lies with the queen." He told John that he had gone to Agravain, playing on the latter's jealousy of Lancelot. At his urging, Agravain made one more attempt to denounce Lancelot and the queen to Arthur, but this time he presented it as a legal matter. If Lancelot and Guinevere could be found together in a compromising situation, *in flagrante delicto*, then Arthur's own laws would require him to take action against them. As Mordred had explained before, it was this legality—the absence of irrefutable proof—that had enabled the king to avoid the subject until now. Agravain, following proper legal procedure, asked authorization to seek evidence against Lancelot, and Arthur had little choice but to grant it.

That was the major step, even though much remained to be done. In fact, gathering the evidence was easy enough, since Arthur's persistent refusal to accept the truth had made the couple overconfident and indiscreet. Agravain and some accomplices burst into the queen's room to find the queen in bed and her lover in the process of dressing. Lancelot escaped, and Arthur, looking stricken and confused, ordered the queen held in prison.

Nor was the next step difficult; in fact, at this point Mordred had only to watch the pieces of the puzzle fall into place. With the queen in prison (and facing a death penalty if convicted of adultery and treason), Lancelot was sure to return to rescue her. And he did. He and a small army of followers overpowered the prison guards, broke into the cells, and took Guinevere away.

The following piece of the puzzle was equally predictable. (Mordred said, "If all this weren't so tragic, it would be almost boring: everything is so obvious.") Prisoner or not, Guinevere was still queen, and she had not yet been tried. Therefore, Lancelot's actions constituted kidnapping; and since several prison guards were also killed, Arthur's "favorite knight" had committed a belligerent act that demanded retaliation by the king.

The main components of Mordred's plan were now in place. Arthur had postponed, though surely not forsaken, his plan for domination of the world; he was required, by his laws and his notion of honor (or, said Mordred, his pride), to take up arms against his "best knight and best friend."

The next steps, although carefully calculated, were clearly a gamble. Arthur would be leading all his knights and soldiers against Lancelot's army, and he had to leave someone in charge at home. The possibilities were few: there were those whom Arthur did not know well and thus could not trust; there were knights, however trusted, who were unwell or too old to fight; and there was Mordred. Aside from the last, Pellinore seemed most likely, because he had been a trusted advisor to Arthur. Now, however, he was showing his age badly: his mind wandered and his memory was simply gone. So Mordred

reasoned that, if Arthur himself was at all lucid, he would not leave a kingdom in such shaky hands.

Mordred instead offered his services.

He assumed that Arthur would want a safe rather than an inspired choice, and his bastard son was nothing if not “safe.” Merlin had long since persuaded Arthur that the young man was unfit to be king and that others would not accept him even if he tried to usurp the throne. Moreover, since the day his father had made it clear that Mordred would *never* be king, the young man had never given evidence of any ambition, preferring to bide his time and wait for an opportunity, which now came “in a way I never anticipated or wanted.”

It was true that Arthur had little enough respect for Mordred’s abilities, but that was both the danger and the strength of the plan: danger because he might think Mordred incapable of taking charge, but strength because, having dismissed his son’s ambitions and his ability alike, the king would not consider him to be a threat. Besides, with the entire court and much of the army gone, there would be little enough to do. So Mordred’s only serious concern was the possibility that Arthur would refuse, even in the absence of better options, either because he was ashamed of his son or because of objections from Merlin.

When John suggested that this was not only a gamble, but a dangerous one, Mordred denied it, explaining that there was nothing to lose: if it did not work, Arthur would simply have the war he sought—but against Lancelot. And that, for Mordred, would not be all bad. But it did work: after some thought, Arthur left Mordred in charge.

For some time thereafter, Mordred did not return to talk with John, who recorded his own experiences and impressions rather than the young man’s words. Within weeks of the king’s departure, John began to hear hints and rumors of treason: Mordred was trying to buy the loyalty of Arthur’s vassals, and he even had plans to assume the throne. Long passages in John’s manuscript discuss the implications of these rumors. Could the rumors be true? How could he have misjudged Mordred?

Mordred was confused and bitter and perhaps even deluded, but John had never taken him for a traitor.

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Then, one day, Mordred came back. John's pages describe him as near exhaustion, apparently for want of sleep, but intense, focused, and surprisingly calm. After brief pleasantries, Mordred asked, "So, have the rumors been making their rounds?" John, as if wanting to spare Mordred, said hesitantly, "Well, yes, I've heard an occasional rumor."

"Good!" was the curious response. "Then it's working."

"What?"

"The plan, of course!"

John did not immediately understand how Mordred could be pleased by the rumors, and even less how that could be part of a plan. But Mordred was insistent: "Don't you see? It's the only plan that could work." And as he talked, John began to understand.

Mordred explained that as long as Arthur lived, the world would never be safe. Yet, if he assassinated Arthur at court or even moved against Arthur's army with his own, he would be branded a traitor, and others, urged on by Merlin, might well carry out Arthur's plans to conquer or destroy the world.

The only alternative was to incite Arthur to attack *him*; then he would have to kill his father and be certain afterward that the world learned the whole terrible story. (John comments, wryly, that he now knew what *his* role in all this was and wonders why he did not wonder about Mordred's motives from the very beginning.) It was not, Mordred insisted, a matter of saving his own reputation, by making himself into a martyr rather than a traitor, but rather of manipulating circumstances so as to have a military advantage and so that the world could be forewarned against ever tolerating what he called "another Arthur."

Mordred confirmed to John that one of the rumors that had reached his ears was in fact true: he had bought the allegiance of enough vassals to form an adequate fighting force. They could

defend themselves efficiently from within the city walls, while Arthur's attacking forces would be exposed and vulnerable.

John interrupted the explanation to ask, "But how can you allow Arthur's men and yours to slaughter one another and still claim that you are acting for the good of the kingdom?"

"But that's just the point!" Mordred replied. "We won't kill one another! Well, of course there will be a few casualties, but *only* a few, and the plan takes care of that. You see," he continued in a voice no more than a whisper, "when the killing starts, I ask for a truce to speak with Arthur. I deny the rumors and blame them on any of a dozen people who are jealous because I was left in power. Arthur probably won't believe me, but he won't be certain. Then I say that I don't care for myself but that I can't bear being the cause of the deaths of so many good men on both sides. I suggest single combat. One against one, hand to hand. Each of us will make his army swear allegiance to the winner.

"Now, here's the critical detail: I'll say to my father, 'I'll do combat with you—or, if you wish, with any knight you choose.'" Mordred paused to let the effect sink in, or perhaps to savor the "genius" of his plan. Then he explained, "Now, it's true that he hasn't done much fighting these last years—he leaves that to others now and is content to take the credit—but when I give him the chance to back out and to have someone else fight his fight, his pride will make him decide to do it himself. You see, even if father hasn't had much to do with me for a long time now, I know him better than he knows himself: if he doesn't fight his own battle, his 'image' can't survive. So I have him."

"But what if *he* kills *you*?" asked John.

"It doesn't really matter, provided I kill him, too. And I can do that. All those years I was learning to fight and joust and ride aren't wasted after all: I couldn't impress my father then, but I imagine he'll find me impressive enough now. Arthur should have more dread of me than I of him." The last sentence was spoken with a small, perhaps ironic, smile on Mordred's face. Then, after a short pause, he continued, "So Arthur has to die. And I suppose that means that I have to as well. If I do, then it's

a personal sacrifice, or a political act, or a matter of principle. If I don't, I'll simply be a traitor or a murderer. *And I am neither.*"

They sat in heavy silence for a few minutes, watching the afternoon fade. Mordred sighed. He paused and then said, "Well, I must go do this." Another pause. "Please write the truth." And, without saying goodbye, he left.

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The last page of John's manuscript is an entry recording the final event in the story and offering the scribe's views of it. The event was simple and stark:

"Mordred is dead."

That much was clear and beyond question. Just how it happened was not easy to determine. The first stories, saying simply that both Arthur and Mordred were dead, were met with confusion and near-panic. Some said that the two struck mortal blows simultaneously. Then Merlin stepped in and set the record straight: the cowardly son had attacked his father, but the king had defended himself valiantly. That anyone could be so ambitious and so *evil* as to murder his own father out of political ambition was almost incomprehensible, but there it was: the son viciously killed his father, but our courageous and beloved king was able, before expiring, to punish his cowardly attacker.

It could have happened that way, mused John, but it was hardly likely, and given what Mordred had said about political action and sacrifice, it is probable that he killed Arthur and took his own life. Or, conceivably, Arthur did kill him and spare him the need for suicide. Perhaps the truth is somewhere between what Mordred wanted it to be and what Merlin said it was.

Whatever the truth, there is little chance that history will record the story of a young man willing to give his life for those who had rejected him, a young man prepared to kill the king to save the kingdom. For Merlin, not content with having Arthur avenge his own death, soon conceived his master stroke of image-making. Before long, the people began to understand that Arthur had not died at all! His traitorous bastard son, ever the coward, had challenged him to battle and then, defying the rules

of combat, had struck him with a sword before Arthur was properly armed. Fighting with the strength and brilliance that had always characterized him, the king killed his adversary. His own wound was serious: it would have killed any other man, but not Arthur. Arthur was *not* dead! In fact, there was an eye-witness who saw the king taken on board a ship that then sailed into the distance and disappeared.

Merlin, who had the gift of second sight, let it be known that the king could not and would not die: his destiny required and ensured his survival, and thus he had simply gone to a magical place called Avalon, where his wounds could be treated and his spirit restored. In this time of crisis, Merlin himself was willing to tend to affairs of state—but only temporarily. For someday, when he is most needed, King Arthur will return and once again bring peace, order, and tranquillity to the world.

The next line in John's manuscript begins with the word "But," which is then marked through. Thereupon, the text closes with the traditional *explicit*, a medieval "The End" signifying that nothing more could be added.



